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BEFORE THE WIND

Janet Laing

FROM
Mrs. J. P. Mitchell
Camp Sierra
Fallen Leaf P. O.
Lake Tahoe
California

Kelvin Balds Nutshell

1919

From the Library of

J. Pearce Mitchell



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BEFORE THE WIND



BEFORE THE WIND

BY
JANET LAING
//



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TO
FRANCIS M. CAIRD, Esq., F.R.C.S., EDIN.
REGIUS PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL SURGERY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
AND, AT THE TIME IT WAS BEING WRITTEN,
"SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE,"
THIS RECORD OF THE WRACK-STRAWS
IS
DEDICATED

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. IN WHICH A TAG OF SEA-DRIFT SHARES RESPONSIBILITY WITH THE KAISER	9
II. WHICH TREATS AMONGST OTHER THINGS OF RUGS AND ROSE PARLOURS	30
III. IN WHICH FOR THE FIRST TIME MENTION IS MADE OF THE WRACK-STRAWS	46
IV. WHICH BEGINS WITH POLITE LITERATURE AND ENDS WITH AN ORDINARY TAPER	65
V. IN WHICH BRITAIN GAINS A NEW RECRUIT AND GERMANY LOSES ONE	85
VI. WHICH GIVES SOME ACCOUNT OF AN ENCHANTED WOOD AND OF WHAT BEFEL A HERO THERE . .	115
VII. IN WHICH ANN CHARTERIS FALLS FOUL OF TWO WRACK-STRAWS IN ONE EVENING	136
VIII. IN WHICH TWO MORE WRACK-STRAWS ANNOUNCE THEIR ARRIVAL INSTEAD OF ONE, AND JAMES GREEN RECEIVES A MIDNIGHT MESSAGE . . .	156
IX. IN WHICH MRS. DODSWORTH IS VERY NEARLY LATE FOR BREAKFAST AND ANN RECEIVES A MIDNIGHT COMMUNICATION	181
X. IN WHICH MISS ELDERSHAW ATTRACTS MORE ATTENTION THAN SHE HAS EVER DONE BEFORE IN THE WHOLE COURSE OF HER LIFE	205
XI. IN WHICH MISS CAROLINE IS FORCED TO EVOLVE ANOTHER IDEA	227
XII. IN WHICH TWO PEOPLE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE WRACK-STRAWS ARRIVE AT BARTONSMUIR	252

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIII. IN WHICH GREEN SPENDS A PROFITABLE EVENING AND MRS. DODSWORTH SUFFERS FROM OVER- FATIGUE BEFORE BREAKFAST	276
XIV. IN WHICH MR. TOSH FINDS IT INCREASINGLY DIFFI- CULT TO COMBINE THE PURSUIT OF LITERATURE WITH THAT OF CRIMINALS, AND MISS CAROLINE ABSOLUTELY REFUSES TO BE ESCORTED IN TO DINNER BY HIM	296
XV. WHICH SPECIAL CONSTABLES IN THE COURSE OF THEIR DUTY COME WITHIN AN ACE OF MAKING THE FINAL CHAPTER	320
XVI. IN WHICH MISS CAROLINE AND THIS RECORD BOTH COME TO A CONCLUSION	337

BEFORE THE WIND

CHAPTER THE FIRST

IN WHICH A TAG OF SEA-DRIFT SHARES RESPONSIBILITY WITH THE KAISER

It was a dark November night.

A man who, but for the accident of his birth, would have cut a grotesque and insignificant figure on this planet, was sitting in Berlin carefully guarded from intrusion, dreaming fantastic dreams of world-empire.

Because of those dreams thousands upon thousands of better men, out to materialise them, were sacrificing all that they had once held dear and sacred; flames from desolated homes were lighting up the gloomy heavens; fair lands were lying waste under cover of the darkness: and a tired young woman, by name Ann Charteris, was driving across London from Victoria to St. Pancras.

She was on her way to Scotland to take a post as companion and passing at the same time from the known to the unknown. Behind her lay seventeen sunny years of youth and one more which had been as the valley of the shadow of death to her.

In the autumn of 1914 she had been at school, a famous school, all spacious beauty and high tradition. In the teeth of the war and of all that it might mean for them her mother had sent her back there after the fateful summer holidays.

"We'll find the money somehow," the dauntless woman had said. "Now that Jim has enlisted it may fall to you to carry out our plans for his future."

Ann knew how ambitious these plans were, and how passionately they had been cherished. Despair had seized her when she thought of her powers as compared with those of her brilliant brother. At the same time, however, pride had arisen within her and a determination to justify her beloved mother's belief in her.

Her father was a doctor and had been a notable one in his own place until three years before, after a bad illness, he had had to sell his practice and retire to the Alum Bagh, a quaint summer pleasure-house on the south coast, which had been left him about that time by an Anglo-Indian uncle. This old white villa with green outside shutters stood about a mile from the little sea-port of Lowhampton, and only the breadth of a road separated the sands from the wall surrounding its wind-swept garden set about with tamarisk bushes.

It was a loveable dilapidated abode with something debonair in its appearance even in the worst of weathers.

"It's like me," said its new owner to Dr. Warren of Lowhampton whom he had summoned just after his arrival to give him a general overhauling. "It's in its last stages, but it's still cheerful."

Dr. Warren had been a fellow-student. When he had finished his examination, he sat back silently in his chair, and there he remained for a moment looking at his stethoscope with a curious expression on his handsome weather-beaten face.

Then raising his eyes he met those of his patient fixed upon him with such evident enjoyment of his shocked state of mind that, in spite of every reason against it, he could not help his gravity relaxing.

"You are an extraordinary man, James Charteris," he said laughing a little.

"That's right, David," said his patient. "I know quite well what you are thinking, so that there is no need to say it, is there? And besides, believe me, sympathy is not the treatment. I never found it answer in these cases. What

you've got to do, sir, is to help me to die decently, and the only way to do that is to ignore things altogether. So never ask me how I feel. You know how I am bound to feel. But come and see me often and have a smoke when you have time, and be ready always when I am at my tether's end to come and stand by the women."

It was from her father that Ann at school received a letter one afternoon about a year before this record opens. It had been a day of relief and rejoicing after many weeks of heavy anxiety. The tide of invasion had been turned back from Paris. The retreat from Mons was at an end. A girl had come in waving a letter from her brother who had come safe through everything, and was sure the war would be over by Christmas.

"And here's a letter for you, too, Ann," she added, handing it over joyously.

Ann was surprised. It had been her seventeenth birthday the day before and she had received quite a packet of letters from home including one from her father who did not write often. Yet here was another from him. She tore open the envelope. Her father's letters were always a pleasure to read, long and gossipy, full of amusing little odds and ends of news.

This one, however, was very short.

"My own little Ann," it ran. "Your dear mother died very suddenly an hour ago. We must be glad that she was spared illness. At breakfast-time she seemed well and happy. Jim has just arrived on three days' leave, and is taking this to the post. We need you badly, my dear. . . ."

Afterwards Ann recalled the feeling of utter surprise that came first, as of one who has received a mortal blow from a beloved hand, her sharp sense of astonishment that she who had opened the door for her to endless vistas should have failed her now on the very threshold. It kept her calm and composed during the interview with the head-mistress and all the subsequent good-byes.

"What a queer girl Ann is!" the girls said that evening when she was already far away. "She doesn't seem to mind a bit about her mother."

But the head-mistress had seen deeper. She, too, had passed that way and had not seemed to mind a bit either.

"My dear," she had said, holding the girl's cold hands in hers while her strong, clever, resolute face changed and softened and was as Ann never before had seen it, "you will need all your courage soon, and God's at the back of that, remember."

Her father, very grey and haggard, met her at the door of the Alum Bagh.

"It is no longer herself, my dear," he said later when they stood together in the upstairs room looking down at the beautiful face so aloof, so strange in its indifference. "I can feel her with us telling us that, trying to comfort us, eager, desperate. We must not drag her spirit down. We must do our best together."

And Ann had tried her level best, but it had been very hard for both father and daughter in the first weeks.

They had begun to adjust themselves, however, when like another bolt out of heaven came the news that Jim's regiment was ordered to the front.

The war was not over though Christmas had come and gone and the light-hearted prophet of victory was in his grave near Béthune. Everywhere there was arming for battle. Every day there were farewells.

Jim wrote in great excitement and eager for the fray.

"And she would not have had it otherwise," said the father, "though I believe the thought of his going helped to kill her. Well, we must rise to this new occasion, Ann, my girl."

So again to the best of her ability Ann rose, and the rising turned the school-girl into a woman, changing her affection for her two charges into a passionate devotion. They were so helpless and so dependent upon her. It

broke her heart to think of her inadequacy. But she spent herself in their service to the last ounce of her capacity. She was everything that she could be to them.

Jim tried to say something of this to her before he left, when he came home for one night's leave to say good-bye.

At the darkening when the father, worn out with the sorrow of parting, was dozing in his chair by the fire, the brother and sister strolled out together into the garden. On the low white wall beyond the tamarisk hedge they leaned side by side looking out over the water. It was mild and still. There was not so much wind as to stir the feathery branches of the bushes behind them. A full moon was making a glittering pathway across the sea. With a shiver Ann remembered that at the other end of that fairy road two long lines of determined men were lying in wait to kill each other. Even now as though in response to her thought three moving red lights appeared on the horizon, ammunition-transport-boats laden with broken guns for repair waiting there for the tide to rise and bring them up the river to the harbour.

For a long time the brother and sister talked there together of trivial things, conscious all the while of the depths of the unspoken, and a sense of utter incompetence was growing upon the girl when Jim suddenly laid his big hard hand on her shoulder.

"You've been a brick, Ann," he said huskily. "If anybody could have made up for—her, you would have done it."

"Oh, Jim——" Ann began, and then could say no more.

"It will be harder for you than for me," Jim went on steadily. "But I want you to know that it's all the world to a man to have—any one like you to back him."

He paused, but Ann was still speechless. As by an inspiration from the mother who was gone she realised in that moment what this departure might mean for the boy at her side, so wistful amid all his eager courage, so beautiful, so strong, with such depths of hidden tenderness in him. She had a glimpse of what life in another time might

have meant for him, as lover, husband, father, and of what it now might mean for him. Later when she had time to think she raged at the reasons for it all. That night there was no room in her heart for anything but Jim himself, her Jim, her mother's Jim, who might be going to mutilation or death.

The grip on her shoulder tightened suddenly.

"Try if you can not to cry," said Jim. "I—I can't bear it."

Ann dashed away her tears.

"I'm not crying, dear," she said. "I only wish I was going with you. It's grand for you to be a man."

"Yes. Isn't it?" said Jim all aglow again in a moment. "Isn't it?"

.

No letters in all the breadth of Britain were more impatiently awaited, more joyfully received, more eagerly read than Jim's were. Ann would watch for the post-girl coming along the sandy road from the town, and run out to meet her at the white gate between the tamarisks. In their afternoon walks at first she and her father always went in the direction of Lowhampton so that they might meet the girls the sooner. A time soon came, however, when the letters arrived at longer intervals, and, that none might witness their disappointment, they no longer went to meet her. Sometimes many days would elapse without any word coming from beyond the sea save the meagre censored messages in the newspapers telling of the huge struggle in which lives seemed to be of no account except as a means of destroying other lives.

"Ann, my dear," said the father at last after a long blank three weeks, "we must pull ourselves together, my girl. It can do our boy no good to go grizzling about him day after day. What we've got to do now is to send him thoughts of courage. That will be of more use to him than all our parcels."

Wonderfully often after that they did rise to the exalted plane from whence alone thoughts of courage could be sent forth, and whether they did or not they tried to cheer each other. They worked hard too. One night Dr. Warren found his patient wrestling with large wooden knitting-pins.

"Swabs for the hospitals, sir," he said looking up at him gaily. "They shall see that James Charteris can still do something for them."

"Isn't father wonderful?" said Ann afterwards when as usual she went downstairs with their visitor to lock the front-door after his departure.

But the doctor, though he did not say so, thought her the more wonderful of the two. He hardly ever spoke to her, but he had long since taken to watching her from behind the clouds of tobacco smoke as he sat talking with his old friend. He could do this the more easily because she generally read to herself while she was knitting, judging him apparently to be interested only in his patient. He liked to see her slim brown hands busy among her knitting-needles, her flower-like face with its crown of chestnut hair bent gravely over her book in complete unconsciousness of his observation. It was no saint's face either. The grey eyes under the level brows, for all their abstraction at times, were very human. They could twinkle with merriment and flash with fire. About the corners of the mouth, too, there was always humour lurking.

"She's a chip of the old block with her mother's beauty too," the doctor would say to himself as he wended his way homewards, and in his strenuous day-times even a distant glimpse of the Alum Bagh with its white wall and its tamarisk trees would warm his heart like a cordial.

It pleased him too, though he knew that it was selfish of him to be pleased, that the dwellers there had so few other visitors. Ann's mother had not troubled to make many friends in Lowhampton, and those she had were mostly old people who found the long sandy road too much

for them. Everybody besides was too busy with war-work for any call-making. The energetic wife and daughters of Mr. Atterbury, the family lawyer, who had been commanded by him to make friends with Ann, contented themselves with asking her to join a Red Cross work-party, and as she could not accept their invitation that intimacy came to nothing. Mr. Atterbury himself was too busy to come as often as he would have wished to chat with cheerful Charteris as he called him. His junior partner was in the field and he was over head and ears in business.

There remained the vicar, but he had just been made a war-chaplain and was too much absorbed in the military part of his flock to take much interest in the other. His only motive indeed for calling on civilians at that time seemed to be to get them to help him to fill up the programmes of music which he had rashly pledged himself to provide for the soldiers every Thursday evening. Therefore when he had asked Ann if she sang or played or recited or acted and had been answered in the negative, the inhabitants of the Alum Bagh, for all the benefit of clergy they received, might, as Mary the maid said, have been black savages.

All this was nothing to Ann, however, for it was being alone with her father that she liked best, when he read aloud while she knitted, and their chairs were drawn up to a great fire of drift-wood. In long silences they would sit listening to the sighing of the sea and the wind whispering in the tamarisk bushes. The spirit-world would seem very near them then, and the things unseen the only things that mattered.

Thus refreshed from time to time they held on to hope whether the letters came or did not come. At last, however, they ceased coming altogether.

"Oh, daddy," said Ann one night when months had passed without a word, "I'm afraid—I'm so afraid that we'll have no more letters."

"Then, my dear," he returned, "if visible communica-

tion has failed, there is all the more need for the invisible to hold strong and steadfast."

That night as on every night they prayed together for courage, but alone in her room afterwards Ann prayed with bitter tears for news.

Her prayer was answered. Next afternoon when they came in from their walk a large envelope was lying on their tea-table. It contained half-a-dozen or so of their own letters tied together and with "Killed in Action" written across them.

Ann held out the packet to her father in silence, and as he read the inscription it seemed to her that he became old quite suddenly. He stood up bravely still nevertheless.

"Well done, my lad," he said with trembling lips.

Then, however, laying the packet on the table again, he sat down quietly in his arm-chair, and holding out his hand to Ann, he drew her gently down beside him.

They sat thus for a long time hardly speaking. The dusk closed round them, but he would not go to bed. The wind and the sea were silent with them. It seemed to Ann as though they were all awaiting something.

Once the sound of creaking shoes coming up the stairs broke harshly upon the stillness. It was Mary the maid coming to take away the tea-things.

Ann rose and met her in the door-way.

"Wait a little, Mary," she said feeling as though some one else were speaking. "We haven't had tea yet. We have had bad news. My brother has been killed. I shall ring when I want you."

It was about an hour after this, as Mary afterwards related, that the Miss called to her to run for Dr. Warren. The master had taken very ill and he was never again right sensible.

In this last particular Mary was wrong however. For a few brief moments that night the father regained consciousness. Ann, kneeling in a kind of stupor by the bedside, was made aware of the change by the hand she was holding

trying to take hold of hers. Looking up she found his eyes open and looking at her. There was even a faint glimmer in them of the old gaiety.

Afraid to speak she patted his hand with her free one.

The stiff lips moved and she bent down to listen.

"Thoughts of courage——" he whispered.

"Yes, daddy, yes," she answered eagerly.

But no more words came and he seemed to fall into a quiet slumber.

Ann after a time slept also. Returning about midnight Dr. Warren found them still hand clasped in hand.

Ann was awakened by his touch on her shoulder.

"Miss Charteris," he began, "your father——"

"He is dead," said Ann quietly as soon as she saw the doctor's face. "I knew he was dying just now when he spoke to me."

"Then he has died as he wished to die—conscious," said Dr. Warren. "Thank God for that, Miss Charteris."

"Yes," said Ann again with the feeling as though some one else were speaking.

The doctor watched her for a moment irresolutely, as she still kneeled motionless looking at the quiet face upon the bed.

Then going out softly he closed the door behind him.

"Sympathy is not the treatment," he quoted with a twinge of remembrance.

On the evening of the third day after this, Ann was seated alone in the darkening sitting-room trying to realise what Mr. Atterbury the lawyer had been saying to her during the last half-hour. From much that was incomprehensible to her this at least had emerged, that the war rolling on its course had torn not only her loved ones from her, but her means of living, and her home itself, the dear old Alum Bagh, the place of memories. Her mother's income had died with her, and her plans had been cut short in their midst. Bold strategist and clever manager as she had been, she yet

had taken no account of anything so unlikely as her own immediate death. Of what had been left the war had made short work. They had been living latterly upon capital. There was literally no money. Even the sale of the house and of all it contained would not be sufficient to pay up everything. It was unlikely indeed that the Alum Bagh, out of repair as it was, would sell at all just now. So Mr. Atterbury had said.

"Yes, but I am there, Mr. Atterbury," Ann had replied almost immediately. "I shall of course make it my business to pay everything as soon as possible."

Mr. Atterbury had blinked kindly at her then over his eye-glasses. He had been hearing rumours of late. Did this speech of Ann's mean that Lowhampton for once was not talking absolute nonsense?

"I am glad to hear that you have prospects," he had begun tentatively.

"I have no prospects at all," Ann had replied bluntly. "No prospects of skilled work at least. I have no certificates. I am not trained for anything. But I think I could be a companion."

"I'll vouch for that, Miss Charteris," the lawyer had said warmly. Ann's eyes had filled then with sudden tears, but she had forced them back.

"Do you know of any one wanting a companion immediately?" she had said as steadily as she could.

Then Mr. Atterbury had considered for a moment, his eyes bent on the fire and a strange expression on his countenance.

At last, however, as though he had made up his mind, he had risen briskly.

"I almost think I do," he had said. "Will you leave me to manage the matter?"

Half-an-hour afterwards Dr. Warren, seated at his belated dinner-table, swore to himself as the maid announced that Mr. Atterbury was in the consulting-room.

"What the devil does he want just now?" he said.

Nevertheless he rose and went to him.

His temper was not improved by hearing that all the Atterburys were in the best of health, and that what the lawyer had come for at that untimely hour was to inquire about the post of lady's companion which the doctor had spoken of the other day to Mrs. Atterbury.

"Ah, yes, for my old friends the Miss Bartons of Bartons-muir?" said the doctor, affecting an interest he did not feel. "You must remember the Miss Bartons here years ago—rich hospitable old people with a place of their own in Scotland. They used to come here every year at one time and live for months at the hotel."

"Of course, of course," said Mr. Atterbury. "And there was a niece Lottie, too, I recollect that drove all of us young men for miles round crazy, and who used to ride to hounds with you. What has become of her?"

"She married," said the doctor shortly. "Did you say you had heard of a companion for the Miss Bartons?" he added.

His face betrayed nothing even to the keen eyes watching him.

Mr. Atterbury adjusted his eye-glasses.

"Yes," he said. "I have heard of somebody wanting a post of that kind immediately, because she's proud and hard-up and in need of money to pay her debts with."

"Do I know her?" said the doctor.

"Yes. Miss Charteris."

This time the doctor distinctly changed countenance.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Surely you don't mean that?"

"You were a friend of her father's," said Mr. Atterbury, "and in any case I am betraying no confidence. She gave me leave to make inquiries for her, though she did not know that I was coming here. There is no dishonour about the debts. They are simply the result of these cursed times. But she considers their existence a slur upon the memory

of those that are gone, and she cannot rest till they are paid up."

"But, Atterbury, is there nothing?" exclaimed Dr. Warren. "I thought you were in charge of their affairs?"

"So I am," said Mr. Atterbury, "but you can't make money of nothing. Every single thing they had money in has either gone down half since the war or failed altogether. I've done my best. I've tried all I could to save something. But I'm no more to blame than a chauffeur who has lost his master's motor in an avalanche."

"But the house—the Alum Bagh—can't you sell that?"

"Not now certainly," said Mr. Atterbury, "and you know what it's like. A bad storm any night might strew it along the shore. If it holds together till the war is over we might get something from a mad artist for it perhaps."

"Good Lord!" said the doctor.

After that there was silence till Mr. Atterbury rose and slowly took up his hat from the table.

"Then may I tell Miss Charteris that I have heard of a post for her?" he said.

"Yes—oh, yes—certainly," said the doctor rising also. "I shall write to-night to the Miss Bartons. That is——" he paused for a moment. "I shall write to-night," he repeated abruptly.

"I wonder if he really will," said Mr. Atterbury to himself as the door closed behind him and he went down the steps.

And his mind, in spite of many distractions, kept occupying itself with this problem all the evening.

About two hours later Ann was still seated thinking in her upstairs sitting-room. Twice Mary the maid had come in, once with supper and once with the lighted lamp. Both times Ann had sent her away. She wanted nothing. She would rather be in the dark she said. Mary therefore, being practical, had eaten the poached egg herself and left the biscuits and the milk and the lighted lamp on the landing.

Then feeling sleepy as she always did when the wind was rumbling in the kitchen chimney, she had decided that, as her mistress did not seem to need her, she might as well retire for the night.

Ann, quite indifferent to what her handmaid did, leaned on at her upstairs window. The gale was rising with the tide. Out at sea a great storm was brewing. In the gathering darkness the tamarisk trees were waving wild arms skywards. She was watching them fascinated when the garden gate banged and a tall figure crossed the garden. A moment later the door-bell rang. It rang again after a little, but no Mary answered it, for the good reason that she, sensible girl, was by this time sound asleep. Ann rose uncertainly, but footsteps were already on the stair and she had guessed who her visitor was before she met him on the landing. He had been her stand-by in her day of trouble, her ever-ready, ever-willing helper. She was glad he had come now. She had been too distraught before to thank him. She had some books too of her father's to give him. From the first he had refused money payment.

"This is good of you to come, doctor," she said. "And on such a night," she added, as another great gust shook the house.

He carried the lamp into the sitting-room for her while she drew the curtains across the windows. Then they sat down facing each other beside the dying fire.

"I'm glad," she began bravely, "to have this chance of thanking you, Dr. Warren, for all you have done for us—My father—" But she could go no further. She paused, striving to regain her composure.

"Miss Charteris," the doctor broke in, "indeed it is I who have to thank you. I cannot say what your father's friendship has been to me, nor what a blank in my own life he leaves behind him. I shall miss him more than I can tell you."

Ann sat still speechless, blinking back her tears, looking younger and slighter than ever in her black dress, the dim

bleakness of the room, the fierce turmoil of the storm outside, emphasising her forlornness. Giant hands seemed to be rattling at the rickety windows and threatening to tear from her even their frail shelter.

"He was an inspiration to me," the doctor went on. "His life during those last months was a triumph of spirit that it did a man good to see. But," he went on more hurriedly, leaning forward, elbows on knees, his strong capable hands clasping each other, "if there was anything finer than his courage it was yours, Miss Charteris. Don't try to speak—it was—and seeing you bearing up so splendidly through everything has—has made me feel as if—as if I couldn't do without you—that's all."

"Don't try to speak yet," he went on, as Ann sat looking at him speechless now from sheer amazement. "I am saying it badly. I am past all the romance of youth, and old enough to be your father. But if you care to have—the love of a man who needs you—needs you badly in his lonely house and in his lonely life along there at Low-hampton—it is yours. And so I have just come to ask you if—if you will be my wife, dear," he concluded.

No fervid eloquence could have moved Ann at that moment as those simple words did. As she listened wondering she realised that at the heart of her grief was the sense of not being needed any more by anybody. Yet . . . His wife . . . She sat staring at him scared and trembling.

The man's rugged face softened as her eyes met his questioningly, and a great pity for her awoke within him.

This beautiful slim brown-haired creature, so proud yet so sweet—was this the kind of wooing she should have had? Ah, twenty years ago he would have done it better! He had known how to woo then. He had been something like a lover then, though it had all been for nothing.

"Oh, I know," he went on as Ann still was silent. "It's not much I have to offer you. A country doctor——"

"My father was a country doctor too," Ann broke in suddenly, finding her voice all at once and dashing away the

impeding tears. "And I thank you—oh, I do thank you," she went on, "for—for honouring me—but, oh—you will understand I know—you who always understand—I can't marry you, I can't indeed."

Here she fairly broke down.

But he rose and, going over to her, took her hands gently away from her face and held them.

"Of course I understand," he said. "The idea is all new to you. You had not thought of me like that."

"No—only as a good kind friend," she managed to say, looking up at him through her tears, "the best and the kindest."

"Well now you must go on thinking of me as a friend," he said, "as a friend who expects nothing from you except what you want to give, a friend who will be there thinking of you and—caring for you always, and ready to help you at any time when you have gone out into the world as you mean to do—do you not?"

"You know?" she whispered.

"Yes, Atterbury came to me. He knew that I had been inquiring about some one for just such a post as you want. Two old friends of mine—Miss Bartons whom I used to know long ago—wrote to me the other day. I should like to think of you with them. They will pay you well and they are kind souls. May I tell them you will come?"

"Yes. Oh, yes please," she exclaimed all eagerness.

Then with a quick graceful, unexpected movement she stooped suddenly and kissed his hand.

"Ah, you are good!" she whispered.

It was only for a moment, but she had worked magic unawares. It was the first touch of a woman's lips that he had felt for twenty years. Fires that he had thought long dead flickered from their old grey ashes suddenly. . . .

Almost roughly he laid her hands down in her lap, and turning away from her he began doing something to the lamp.

"I shall write to the Miss Bartons to-night then," he said after a moment. "How soon can you be ready to start?"

"Any time," said Ann at once.

She turned to speak to him almost cheerful again.

Here once more was her father's friend, the familiar adviser in emergency. Her tears for the moment were dried. There were a hundred things she wanted to ask him about the Miss Bartons. But now, just as she wanted to talk, it seemed he wanted to leave her.

He was already on his way to the door.

"I must be off," he said. "There's a man very bad in the cottages beyond you here. I should have been there an hour since."

Heavy rain was lashing by this time on the windows.

"I'll come down," said Ann rising, "and light you to the door."

She had done it before many a time, but that night he would not have it.

"No, no—good night," he said without even thanking her.

"If she had come near me again," he muttered as he hurried away down the stair, "it's ten to one I would have made an absolute fool of myself."

Ann stood listening till the door banged behind him.

She was chilled and perplexed by this abrupt leave-taking.

Had she, after all, offended him she wondered.

Yet he had seemed to understand. . . .

But men were like that, or so at least they said in books. They wanted everything from you when they fell in love with you or nothing, so that now the doctor whom she had learned to trust was really nothing to her, or rather she was nothing to him. . . .

Sitting down again to think this out with the storm howling round the house, it seemed to Ann to add the last drop of bitterness to her returning misery. A terror seized her of what she must now suffer. Already she could feel the first chill of coming agony. Nowhere was there any help. Even the household gods were alienated—her father's chair drawn up to the round table, the lamp that had shone on so many happenings, the eight-day clock that had ticked

out so many hours. . . . They were no more hers either. Nothing at all was hers.

A madness of grief came upon her. She could bear no more to sit there. Yet the thought of bed was intolerable. She felt she must make for the open. Without waiting to take the lamp with her she fled down the stair. At the door the hurricane fought against her, but she forced her way with the strength of desperation. Hatless, coatless, with her hair loosening behind her, she struggled down the pathway to the gate. She could have told where it was even in the darkness by its creaking. But though the moon was half-hidden amid the flying clouds, she could see the waving branches against the white background of the breakers.

Once at the gate, however, she had to stay there clinging to it. She could go no further. All the tempest seemed to be meeting her, choking her breath from her, killing her, annihilating her. A horror of great darkness took possession of her as well, and shook her soul even as the storm-wind was shaking her frail support. A sense of her utter impotence and insignificance overwhelmed her.

What was the good of battling on? she asked herself. She would have to go under at last. Even Jim had had to, and what was she in comparison? They had all gone—all her loved ones into the darkness. Even her father himself—and what had he known of what was beyond more than any other? Had he only, like Socrates, wished to give her an opinion to support her spirit in its passage into nothingness? Had all the thoughts of courage and the rest been but toys he had given her to play with?

No thoughts of courage were coming to her now. Would those who loved her if they were anywhere at all have suffered her to remain without them?

No—it was impossible.

They must be nowhere in existence then, except as that of which she dared not think, in the cemetery at Low-hampton, in that shallow grave behind the trenches. . . .

They as well as she had been tricked and deluded into striving and praying and being brave, only to find out their mistake at the end of it. . . .

She had just reached this conclusion when a long fragment of sea-tangle flying landwards with the rain and the foam struck her sharply across the eyelids.

At any other time she would hardly have noticed such a thing, but at this moment it seemed an insult direct from omnipotence, and clinging to the gate, blinded, maddened, like a creature at bay——

"I hate You—hate You—hate You, God!" she shrieked aloud into the universe. . . .

A moment afterwards she started violently, for a hand had been laid on her cold hand where it clutched the gate—a strong warm kindly hand.

"Child, is that you?" said the doctor's voice.

It was quietly spoken, yet so near she could hear it through the storm. The gate-latch clicked and next moment he stood close beside her. She turned to him as she had so long been accustomed to turn and forgetting everything but her terror and her loneliness——

"Oh, I am glad you have come!" she panted.

There was a moment's silence. Then the doctor spoke again.

"I am on my way back from the cottage," he said. "It is a wild night for you to be out."

Even as he spoke a terrific blast laden with sleet and spray swept over them, and before it had passed, or either of them had realised what was happening, she was sobbing on his breast with his arms about her.

For a long moment they stood thus in the troubled moonlight, with the tempest roaring and beating round them, while forgotten the years fell from the man and his lost youth returned and ran like fire through all his being.

"Dearest, you need me too I think," he whispered, trembling like any boy lover. "Let us hold together always—shall we?"

"If you really want me," sobbed Ann.

"Want you?" he cried. "*Want* you, sweetheart?"

There was something quite new in the voice. The girl responded to it instinctively.

"I'll come, I'll come then," she answered breathlessly as, drifting themselves now, with the wind behind them, they went up the path to the house together.

A moment later they were in the little hall lit only by the lamplight from the open door of the room above.

"Come soon," he whispered, drawing her yet closer.

Even as he spoke, however, sharp remembrance came to her. Her half-conscious glance had fallen on her father's old hat and coat and stick still in their places as he had left them.

She withdrew herself a little, pushing back the wet hair from her forehead.

"I cannot come to you with the debts unpaid," she said.

"Oh, my dear, I have enough for everything," he answered.

"I know and I know how generous you are," she returned, "but they would have thought it a dishonour. If—if there is nothing more—their memories at least must be safeguarded. I must pay their debts before I do anything else, even if I never come to you at Lowhampton."

She would not be moved from this resolve though he argued on for some time still pleading with her.

"You strange stubborn thing," he said at last, holding her from him in the dimness. "You are like these tamarisks of yours—fairy-like to look at, but tough enough to withstand anything."

As he spoke he caught her to him again and kissed her cold lips passionately.

"Good night, good night, my own darling," he whispered.

Then he went out into the roaring darkness.

As soon as he reached his house at the other end of the town, he wrote and dispatched his promised letter to the

Miss Bartons. After the business-like opening he added—

"She is the daughter of an old friend who died in debt owing to the war. She considers it to be a sacred duty to clear off this liability, and until she has done so she refuses to come here as my companion though she has promised to do so ultimately. In other words, she is engaged to be married to me and you are the first to whom I have announced the fact, remembering your kindness to me in the old days and glad that my little Ann is to be with you until I am allowed to have her."

After he had sent this off, he sat on thinking and he thought so deeply that his pipe had long gone out when he turned in his chair and, unlocking a drawer near him, took out of it a faded photograph.

It was the picture of a pretty girl in old-fashioned riding costume, with her hat set jauntily on one side, a merry maid with mischief lurking in every little curl and dimple.

He smiled a little—no one could have helped it—in response to the laughter in her eyes.

"Lottie," he said softly.

Then he flung it suddenly into the fire, where it smiled still till the flames caught it.

Ann meanwhile had made her way back to her sitting-room, dazed and shaken it is true, but no longer the frenzied being who had left it. The old room also seemed different when she re-entered it. The spirits of her dead seemed to greet her there and to be glad that she was the promised bride of him whom they had known and trusted. In a strange dream-like apathy she made up the dying fire, piling on the drift-wood recklessly as she had been wont to do in happier times. Then wrapped in her white dressing-gown she seated herself before the blaze to dry her hair and listen the while to the storm still rising. . . .

Three days later she left the Alum Bagh. The wind had sunk again to a faint sighing, but great waves were still breaking on the beach beneath the tamarisks when she was arriving at St. Pancras on her way to Scotland.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

WHICH TREATS AMONGST OTHER THINGS OF RUGS AND
ROSE PARLOURS

"THIRD class, miss? Yes, miss," said the porter cheerfully.

"Here's a Ladies Only. Will that do, miss?"

At that moment anything would have done for Ann.

All she wanted was to get into the train, anyhow, anywhere, and go to sleep.

The porter deposited her belongings in the rack, her rug, a provision-basket from the doctor, violets from the doctor, books from the doctor, papers, sweets, from him.

The sight of all these love-gifts, tired as she was, warmed her heart as she settled herself in her corner. She drew off her left-hand glove to look at the engagement ring which had been his last present to her. It was beautiful. Diamonds. It flashed like fire in the dimness of the compartment, just as his love for her had flashed out from the dark night of storm and misery.

It had been a strange three days since, full of bitter grief, yet with gleams of comfort at times and even happiness. Her lover had hardly spoken again of love to her. He had been lover-like only at meeting and parting. The rest of the time he had been simply a good comrade, reminding her now of her father, now of her brother. And she had learned to call him David. She thought no more of him as "the doctor." As she took the ring off and slipped it on to a gold chain under her blouse she said the name softly over to herself. David. She might well call him that. He had overcome giants for her. He stood now between her and the powers of darkness, the terror, the horror that had almost driven her frantic. He had come out of the

all-surrounding cruelty and folded her to his breast for shelter. She was his. He was hers. She was no longer desolate. She belonged to him, he belonged to her for always.

On the last evening at the Alum Bagh, he had sat with her before the drift-wood fire and had told her to leave the Beyond alone as being outside her comprehension.

"Our mental vision, we must remember," he had said, "is just as limited in comparison with what there is to be seen as our physical vision is. My hand before your eyes here," and he had suited the action to the word, "prevents you seeing even this little room, even one who loves you."

Then he had spoken to her of her work and of Bartonsmuir, gazing into the fire as he described it, as though he saw it before him there. He had made her see with him the old grey house among windswept trees on the shores of that other sea.

"There is a path that you will like," he had said, "among the dunes between the heather and the sands. There are cowslips there in spring in the sheltered places, and queer little red moths flutter about among the flowers."

He had been silent then until she spoke, and soon after that he had risen to go, but first, as they had stood in the firelight, he had taken her face between his hands and looking deep into her eyes——

"So, little one," he had said, "we'll begin all over again."

Ann was still far away in the firelit room at the Alum Bagh when a clear young voice close at hand recalled her to her surroundings.

"Yes, Miss Brownrigg," said the voice. "It's a Ladies Only, and there are three seats left."

A moment later the head and shoulders of an elderly gentlewoman wreathed in a grey motor-veil appeared at the carriage window. She had an anxious and hawk-like appearance and mobile eyes on the look-out for objections.

"This will do," she said, however, after inspecting the

Ladies Only label. "Well, now we must get the luggage. Where *is* that porter? He was to meet us here."

"Oh, he'll come all right," said the school-girl behind her with all the nonchalance of youth. "Milly has gone along there to look for him. Shouldn't we just get in and keep the seats?"

"And leave Millicent wandering about there at mid-night? No, certainly not, Evelyn," said Miss Brownrigg sharply. "Besides who knows if the porter will appear at all? We may have to carry along our luggage ourselves, as people have to do now constantly."

"Oh, very well," said Evelyn, shrugging her shoulders, "I don't mind I'm sure. We must just leave our seats to providence then or this lady," she added, turning to Ann with an engaging grin.

"I'll keep them for you if I can," said Ann.

"Thank you so much," said Evelyn, as she ran after Miss Brownrigg, who already at her utmost speed was making for the luggage-office.

It was only after they had disappeared that Ann, now thoroughly awake to current events, realised with a thrill followed by a hot feeling all over her that she had forgotten to take her ticket to Edinburgh. She had been much too early on the platform and had passed through the barriers before the ticket-checkers were at their posts, and nothing till that moment had occurred to remind her of the important omission. Now it was perhaps too late. Everywhere there were signs that the departure of the train was imminent. Barrow-loads of luggage were being trundled along to the vans. Crowds of people were hurrying past the windows. The guard was exchanging parting remarks with another guard. Men porters and women porters were scurrying about together. It was now or never if she was to get her ticket at all.

She had leaped out of the compartment and gone some yards along the platform before she remembered the three seats she had promised to reserve. Rushing back she threw

her muff, her bag, her magazines, and her rug into the four corner-seats. Then she made off again.

But she need not have been in such a desperate hurry. When she returned breathless with her ticket, the train was pretty much as she had left it. The carriage doors were still standing open. When she came to her compartment, however, she found one of the corners already occupied. The seat where she had thrown her muff had been taken by a man in shabby khaki, just out of hospital apparently, ghastly, emaciated, with drops of perspiration on his forehead.

His eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily. The girl's heart contracted with pain as she looked at him. It was to her as though Jim were seated there, flung aside, abandoned broken.

He might have been like Jim once. He looked no older. He had been big and strong like Jim, handsome perhaps too, though now he was dreadful to look at—sunken-eyed, hollow-cheeked. Ann's eyes filled with tears.

Just then, however, a chatter of loud voices began outside the window.

"I say," exclaimed Evelyn. "What did I tell you, Miss Brownrigg? Here's a man in the carriage."

"But I thought you said it was a Ladies Only," said another voice, presumably Milly's.

"So it is," said Miss Brownrigg with an air of finality. "There's a notice on the window. My good man," she began, addressing the soldier in the corner.

But the good man never so much as opened his eyes in response.

"He's asleep," said Evelyn in a lowered voice, "and he looks very ill. It seems a shame to wake him."

"Nonsense," said Miss Brownrigg, "he can't be asleep yet. He can only have been two minutes in the carriage. There is plenty of room in the other carriages. Call the guard, Millicent. Call the guard."

"No, don't please," said Ann rising hastily and gather-

ing her belongings together. "Let me rather leave the carriage. Then there will be three seats."

"You are very kind," said Miss Brownrigg, stiffly, "but, as you perceive, I have two young girls with me, so that your going out will not improve matters. Call the guard, Millicent. The man must be told that this is a ladies' carriage and that there is plenty of room elsewhere."

At this a fury of rage that almost frightened herself rose up in Ann.

"Don't *dare* to call the guard," she said, her eyes flashing, her hands clenched. "If there is plenty of room elsewhere, go yourselves there, rather than disturb this man who has been to hell to keep you comfortable!"

For a moment the three faces outside stared blankly at her. Then the elderly hawk-like one flushed and softened.

"You are quite right, my dear," she said. "Come along, girls. She is quite right. We'll get seats I daresay in another compartment."

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Ann, left mistress of the field, made her dispositions to remain so. Pulling down all the blinds and closing the door, she leaned out of the window to hide the empty seats behind her. So absorbed was she in keeping disturbances at bay that until the train started she hardly looked again at her fellow-traveller. It was only then that with a sharp stab of fear she noticed that he had fallen limply forward.

In two steps she was by his side. His hands were deathly cold.

"Sure enough he has fainted," she muttered.

Well, thank goodness she had seen fainting before, and there was a flask in the doctor's provision basket. She was wiry, too, for all her slowness. In a few minutes she had him laid flat on the seat, with his tunic unbuttoned, and was forcing brandy between his teeth. She was chafing his hands after that, when, looking up, she found his eyes open and fixed upon her.

"I see I have made an ass of myself," he whispered. "You are very good. I am very grateful."

"Then if you are," said Ann, rubbing away, "please don't speak any more just now."

There was a faint smile on his lips when he closed his eyes again.

"He'll sleep, perhaps," said Ann to herself, and presently he did sleep. Then rising she laid his warmed hands on his breast and getting down her travelling-rug from the rack, she tucked it closely round him. As she did so she noticed a crumpled piece of paper lying on the floor. She picked it up and looked at it. It was a railway pass to Edinburgh and must have fallen out of his pocket.

"Well, he'll not be roused till he's there at least," she resolved, "that is if I can help it."

She sat down to keep watch, and thus they remained through the chill small hours as the train sped on under the stars. After a little Ann dozed in spite of herself also, waking always with a start to find her charge still sound asleep. She had been lavish with her brandy. A warm flush was on his face. His hands too were now quite warm.

"He's sleeping it off splendidly," said Ann to herself. "When he awakes he will be quite different."

She was determined that he should not awake, however, until he did so of his own accord, and to that end, at every stoppage she posted herself at the window, prepared to cope with all intruders.

Once at a great station, amid hubbub of talking and clatter of crockery, a kindly voice asked if there were any soldiers in the compartment.

"Yes, one," said Ann, "an invalid. But he is asleep."

"Oh, but," persisted the benefactress, "I am sure he would be much the better of this."

At the same time a large steaming mug of tea and a huge muffin were held in at the open window.

"You are very kind," said Ann, hastily taking them.

"I'll be back in a minute for the mug," said the bene-

factress who was in a great hurry, and she took her departure.

Ann, in the seclusion of her corner behind the window-blind, thoroughly enjoyed the mug of tea and the huge muffin.

"Where is he?" said the kindly giver as Ann handed the mug back to her.

"Over there resting," said Ann. "He has been very ill."

"But didn't he feel much better for the tea?"

"Oh, yes, thank you—very much," said Ann.

"I thought he would," said the woman. "Well—good journey to you! How glad you must be to get him back home again!"

At the word keen grief awoke in Ann once more, as the train rolled slowly out of the station. The woman had spoken as though it had been Jim. . . . Ah, would that it had been! Would that it had been!

She went and stood for a moment beside the sleeper and the hot tears fell in silence, till a sob breaking from her unawares startled her back to her seat, in terror lest she should have awakened him.

She had not done so, however, because he had been awake for some time, watching her out of half-closed eyes, listening to her, wondering at her, and ever more and more delighting in her.

"Nevertheless you had better stay as you are, Fred Lorimer," he reflected, "for you'll just go off again if you sit up now and give her more trouble, the splendid little darling."

The sob almost broke down his resolution, however.

"She is grieving for some one she loves," he thought. "That's why she's so kind to me."

A babyish jealousy of this other for whom the tears were shed mingled with his other reflections. He felt relieved when she stopped crying and little by little went to sleep.

When it was that he followed her example he never

afterwards could remember, but when he awoke the train was at a standstill and an old porter with one eye was informing him that it was Edinburgh. He sat up giddily.

"I'll gi'e ye a hand," said the porter kindly. "You jist button up yer tunic there, an' I'll fold up yer rug for ye."

"My *rug*?" said Fred amazed. "But I have no rug with me."

"What's this then?" said the porter, holding up a large green plaid. "If this is no' a rug, I dinna ken what it is."

"But it's not mine," said the bewildered traveller.

"Weel it was a' tucked roond ye when I cam' in," said the porter, regarding him humorously out of his one eye. "If it's no' yours it'll be the bonny young leddy's. My, but you soldier-laddies has a' the luck the now!"

A slow flush had mounted in the traveller's face.

"It was her that told me ye was sleepin' here an' sent me to look after ye," added the porter, "so I'd better jist roll it up."

"Well, so it seems," said Fred laughing ruefully. "But she shouldn't have done it. Is she really gone?"

"Ay, she's gone," said the porter. "She was gettin' into a taxi when I saw her. But dinna you pit yersel' about. The rug'll gi'e ye a chance to see her when ye tak' it back to her."

"But that's just what is putting me about," exclaimed the other. "I can't give it back. I don't know either her name or her address, my friend."

"Hoots, man!" said the porter. "There's queerer chances in the world than you meetin' her again. I met my wife——"

Fred rose hastily.

"See if there is a taxi left for me, will you?" he said. "I want to catch the first train to Rathness."

But the taxis were all gone, and he missed the first train, and did not get to Rathness until that afternoon.

His long sleep had worked wonders, however, and he felt almost well until he saw his hostess's face when she met him at the station.

He had seen her looking out for him before the train drew up at the platform—a smart little woman in her forties with something of the coquette in the set of her neat black hat, something of the sportswoman in her upright carriage and sun-tanned cheeks. Fred's heart warmed when he saw her as every one's did, for she radiated kindness as the sun radiates heat. A queen of good comrades she was, a regular good sort.

He rose hurriedly from his seat.

She was still staring about her, however, when he approached.

"Don't you see him, Mrs. Alleyne?" said a man in uniform who was in attendance.

And she was shaking her head when Fred held out his hand to her.

"How d'ye do, Aunt Lottie!" he said.

"Good Heavens!" she exclaimed. "Is *this* Fred Lorimer?"

There was consternation in her honest eyes.

Fred giggled slightly. He felt suddenly terribly weak.

"I wouldn't have known you, boy," she said. "There, that's right—take my arm. . . . Porter! Take these things and put them into Captain Piffard's motor. Captain Piffard—this is my nephew-in-law, Fred Lorimer. Fred—this is my friend, Captain Piffard. He will take your other arm. Now wouldn't you like to go up in the luggage-lift?"

"No, certainly not!" exclaimed Fred. But he was thankful when he reached the motor nevertheless. Captain Piffard had almost to lift him into it.

"And now, my dear, not one word," said Mrs. Alleyne, "until I have put you into bed at least."

For about one minute then she was silent herself as the motor slid smoothly into the darkening town. But as they turned the last corner—

"Fred, I must say it once," she said. "It was perfectly glorious, and we are all *so* proud of it!"

Fred groaned.

"Yes, I know, my dear," she went on hastily. "I got your letter last night saying you would only come on condition that no notice was taken of it. And I've done my very best. Fourteen people are coming to-night to meet the V.C. It was too late to put them off. But you shan't see one of them. And then I had told all the servants of course. And they'll all be there waiting to receive you most likely. Yes . . . There they are . . . with old Margaret and Johnson in front. But if you like I am quite ready to tell them that you won't see them."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Fred holding her back. "Of course I must see Margaret and Johnson. It's strangers that I can't be bothered with just now. They get on my nerves somehow and make me feel idiotic."

The verdict in the servants' hall that night was that Mr. Lorimer was the genuine article and no mistake, and it was accounted a special merit in him that though he was a gentleman born he had joined as a private, and come home with hardly a stitch except an old plaid rug. He was the sole topic of conversation below stairs both before and after the dinner party.

The party itself was a huge success. In the absence of the hero his aunt-in-law made a speech, and there was great drinking of healths and singing of "For he's a jolly good fellow."

The whole house from top to bottom resounded with uproarious noise. Fred heard it in his luxurious room upstairs where he lay in bed in charge of old Margaret.

It was twenty years, she reminded him, since she had last put him to bed, and then it had been as a punishment for being naughty.

"And little, sir, did I think——" she added, or rather began to add, for he stopped her short.

"For God's sake, Margaret," he exclaimed, "let me

hear no more to-night about that V.C. I can't stand it!"

Seeing, however, that she was shocked and a little hurt, and feeling quite sprightly himself after a champagne supper, he invited her presently to take her knitting and pull her arm-chair close to his bedside. Then to her great satisfaction he, as she afterwards declared, told her Everything.

"Which I tell you, Johnson, was as good as anything you've ever been to—cinema or no cinema," she added.

At last, however, she shaded the light and withdrew to the fireside with her knitting.

But never had Fred felt more wide-awake. The distant sound of revelry was rather soothing. The moment he closed his eyes, however, he always found himself in the swaying railway carriage where in the corner opposite there sat a girl with anxious eyes and chestnut hair that shone red when the light fell on it. Sometimes she only sat and watched, sometimes she would come so near that he could smell the violets she was wearing and see the tears that were on her lashes. . . .

Then all at once he started violently, for a light hand had touched his hair.

"Dear boy," said Mrs. Alleyne all radiant in her dinner-gown, "I am so sorry I wakened you. It's only me. We're having a great time, though it's the play without Hamlet. I just ran up to peep at you. Margaret told me you were asleep."

As she spoke she turned to the mirror behind her and tucked a stray curl into place.

"Now be a good boy and go to sleep again," she added. "Is there anything I can get you by the way?"

"Is—is my rug there, Aunt Lottie?" said Fred unexpectedly.

"Good heavens, are you feverish?" she exclaimed, clutching at his wrist as she spoke. "Are you feeling shivery under all those blankets?"

Fred laughed.

"Oh dear no," he said, "and you are not to go for Margaret or for your thermometer either, for I will *not* have my temperature taken. It's only that I—like that rug."

"What creatures of habit we all are to be sure!" said Mrs. Alleyne as she went to get it for him. "And just to think," she added as she tucked it round him, "what this old green thing must have seen in the trenches!"

"Didn't know they had 'em there," said an old Mr. Tosh to himself after his hostess had related this incident in the drawing-room. "They'll be having hot bottles and down-quilts next. No wonder they're all so damned dilatory."

Just about this time, for it was still early in the evening, the owner of the rug was seated with her knitting in the drawing-room at Bartonsmuir. On one side of her was Miss Caroline and on the other Miss Emily Barton.

"I'm like Alice in 'Through the Looking-glass' with the Red Queen and the White Queen," she reflected as she noted, while apparently absorbed in her work, how her two mistresses were scrutinising her.

She at the same time was scrutinising them.

On her right sat Miss Caroline, large and stately, in a great high-backed deep-cushioned easy-chair. She had that serenity of manner peculiar to Personalities, and she was grande dame, too, in every sense of the word. Her old dove-coloured brocade and her gorgeous Indian scarf might have figured in the salon of Madame de Pompadour. Her square, pale, heavily aquiline countenance with its double chin would have been noticeable anywhere. It was crowned and framed in a wealth of faded hair, amber-grey in colour which must once have been quite wonderful, and was now confined, or supposed to be so—for her hair-pins had an extraordinary way of escaping—in a quaint net-cap made entirely of seed-pearls. This had two tassels which hung down on either side and were so long that they almost touched her shoulders. When she talked they glimmered and trembled all the time in strange contrast to her large

still eyes. These gazed out upon the world from under thick amber-grey eyebrows and were the most remarkable thing about her. They were not beautiful, they had hardly any colour, but they seemed always, whatever they were looking at, to be aware of far distances. This lent a curious air of detachment to their owner's manner and sometimes a weird effect of inspiration to her utterances. She was born to command evidently as Miss Emily was born to serve her, and she was totally devoid of any hampering sense of humour.

Miss Emily, on Ann's right, was, except for a slight family likeness, utterly different from her large and dominating sister. She was small and thin and anxious-looking, and had a narrow wrinkled little face. Her grey eyes, darker than her sister's, took note of no far horizons. They were restless, always fully occupied with things near at hand, and had generally a shade of apprehension in them. She wore a black gown, a plain white shawl, and on her head a lace cap with lappets, and she was precise and neat from her tight grey side-curls to the tips of her black velvet slippers.

"And she's the practical one," Miss Caroline had said in a soft rather hoarse voice, indicating her sister with a knitting-pin.

"If I *am*, Miss Charteris," Miss Emily had retorted, "she's the clever one. She gets ideas."

Miss Caroline received this statement with a sigh.

"They are sometimes a great trouble to me," she remarked.

"A *great* trouble," she repeated dreamily.

"Yes, poor dear," said Miss Emily. "But I carry them out for her when I can. Don't I, Caroline?"

"Then," said Ann, "I hope you will let me help. I should love to."

Both old ladies beamed with satisfaction, Miss Caroline with a veiled effect as of sunshine through mist.

"You are very different, Miss Charteris, from our last companion," said Miss Emily.

"Don't speak of her," said Miss Caroline, waving away even the memory with her knitting. "I can never forget how she spoiled my Rose Parlour."

"You see," said Miss Emily, "my sister changed her mind, just after the roses were put up. You know you did, Caroline."

"That was no reason why she should have refused to take them down again," said Miss Caroline gloomily, "but rather the contrary."

"I am glad she did, nevertheless," said Ann cheerfully, "because now I shall have the chance of doing them for you."

Again the old ladies beamed across at each other.

"Thank you, my dear," said Miss Emily, "but not until after the war. We have decided to leave it now till after the war."

The word, spoken suddenly in that quiet room full of the evidences of long and uninterrupted peace, fell upon Ann's ear with startling strangeness. What did they know of war these two old people? No more than the painted ladies in the miniatures on the walls, less than some of these perhaps, who might have danced at the Brussels ball or waited for tidings from Culloden. . . . Yet even these. . . . What had any one in these past days known or dreamed of this orgy of destruction and devilry that was going on as they sat here discussing, forsooth, Rose Parlours?

For a time after that there was no sound in the room but the click of Miss Emily's knitting-needles and the falling of the ashes in the grate. From beyond the closely drawn curtains, however, came a very faint far-off sighing. . . .

The sea. . . . Ann's thoughts sped away to another shore where the Alum Bagh stood deserted behind its tamarisk trees, and the household gods, ticketed for the next day's sale, kept watch for the last time round an empty fireplace.

Then beyond the sea she saw other homes, scenes of desolation in the wake of desperate cruelty. . . .

"You see what we must all do now is war-work," said Miss Caroline in her soft voice dropping one of her knitting-pins.

Ann started as it fell with a clatter upon the parquet and stooped to pick it up again, thrusting from her the thronging visions.

"I am glad to see you are a knitter, Miss Charteris," Miss Caroline went on. "Can you pick up stitches?"

"Certainly," said Ann, respectfully repressing a smile as she became aware of the condition of the large white bed-sock that had been handed to her.

"I am not a knitter," said Miss Caroline, watching her face.

"Oh, well——" Ann began.

"No, I am not a knitter," said Miss Caroline firmly. "Am I, Emily?"

"No, Caroline, you are not," said her sister.

Miss Caroline, with another sigh, settled herself more comfortably in her chair, and as she did so there was another little rattle on the parquet. It was a hair-pin this time. Again Ann picked it up.

"But I do what I can," said Miss Caroline as she replaced it.

Late that night Ann wrote her first letter from Bartons-muir.

"They're dears," she began her last sheet, "especially Miss Caroline, who is, I can see, the lady paramount here. To watch her reading prayers with a large wooden knitting-pin stuck through her head-dress was delicious.

"There was quite a congregation—all the house-servants, who are mostly old, and the man Japp from the West Lodge who does the motor and the odd jobs. There is a gardener, too, but he is married and supposed to have prayers at home. The man Japp, being a lone bachelor, has orders to come up every evening.

"I have a beautiful room, all old mahogany and chintz,

overlooking the garden, and I can hear the waves. I am glad, for I could not be happy I believe—even if I could forget—away from the sound of them. But now when I am lonely I shall remember that you are hearing it too, and caring for me out of sight as you were on that night you know of.

“Good night, dear David. You have told me not to thank you, and I would do anything for you, but my heart rebels and thanks you in spite of me, again and again and again, for all you have been and are to yours . . .

ANN CHARTERIS.

“P. S.—In signing my name I am reminded of something else. The Two have just had a discussion as to how I am to be addressed. Miss Emily wanted to call me Ann, as I am engaged to be married to such an old friend, but Miss Caroline holds this to be undignified. I am therefore to remain Miss Charteris.”

CHAPTER THE THIRD

IN WHICH FOR THE FIRST TIME MENTION IS MADE OF THE
WRACK-STRAWS

For a time then Ann, flung there by the great storm, rested in a content that was half exhaustion in this quiet haven. In her off-hours, however, her sorrow always awoke again and deeps within her called to deeps outside the shallow waters. At those times a growing sense of the futility and uselessness of her life troubled her, and a vision of what, with her training in sorrow, she might be doing in the world.

"I too have been there," she longed to say to fellow-sufferers. "I too have known."

Her personal sadness seemed lost sometimes in her grief for the wholesale destruction of hopes and loves that was going on, for the endless heaping up of misery upon misery. Sometimes even her losses would seem as nothing save as giving her the key to the sense of loss in others—those mourners whom she could not see, who were outside the woods of Bartonsmuir.

She would flee then across the moor to the sea-shore and pace the sands till, as her father would have said, she had adjusted herself, or she would sit there watching distant ships passing up and down the great death-beset sea-road to the eastwards. Then praying for patience she would go back to her old mistresses for whom she had soon a strong half-maternal affection. It was not their fault that they had lived immune from sorrow, that they looked from afar on the agonising world beyond their little domain with a regret which was mostly bewilderment. Sometimes, however, it was rather trying.

"Dear, dear!" they would say, when Ann, in a white heat, read out newspaper accounts to them of fiendish

outrages and sickening horrors. It was a relief to her to do so. She wanted to make their blood run cold, to fling fearful facts and happenings down before them, to see their mild old eyes grow awe-stricken. She longed to tear asunder the web of self-complacency that peace and affluence had woven about them. In spite of her utmost efforts, however, she only succeeded very partially.

"You see they have no flesh and blood in it," she wrote to David at Lowhampton.

And then, even as she wrote the words, the pathos of them would strike her and send her back to her old dears with a remorseful compassion of which they were entirely unconscious.

Their apathy seemed to her then not a thing to rage at, but to pity. At times in the reaction of feeling which came to her she would decide that of all people in the world they were the most to be commiserated. To see Miss Caroline then watching her and pondering as though some dim perception of the truth were dawning upon her would move her almost to tears. It was like a blind man beginning to realise his blindness, a prisoner becoming conscious for the first time of his prison bars.

Miss Emily was always a comfort at these times. She never either watched or pondered, for the very good reason that she had no leisure to do either. Like any old rabbit in her hole under a battlefield, she was wholly occupied with her own business, and that business was her sister Caroline, Caroline's wishes, Caroline's plans. She was practical in comparison to her sister, but she was loyal to Miss Caroline before all things, even to the defence of her unpracticalities.

"You say no one has ever done this before," she said to Ann as she packed a library-full of sevenpennies into a chest that might have been the original of that in the Mistletoe Bough. "But what we want is initiative. We all know that. And what's that I should like to know but being the very first to do things? Caroline has noticed that

we have been sending only a few books at a time which must cause quarrelling among the men. The thing to do therefore is to send a large quantity simultaneously. Leave it to me, Miss Charteris dear. I know what I am doing."

Ann accordingly left her in the draughty attic, with two maids in attendance, for the best part of an afternoon. The result was that Miss Emily had the worst attack of lumbago that she had ever had and the chest never went to France because Japp and McMurtrie the gardener absolutely refused to move it.

"Though I'd do anything in reason for Miss Emily," said McMurtrie to Ann who had been sent to see what was happening in the attic and to report upon it, "or for the soldiers, seein' I'm for off to be a soldier myself."

"*You*, McMurtrie!" exclaimed Ann as the big sturdy man of peace seemed suddenly transfigured before her eyes.

"Yes, miss," said McMurtrie, "if Miss Caroline will give me my leave. So I see no call for me to end mysel' the now, miss."

"And are you going too, Japp?" inquired Ann eagerly.

But Japp was half-way downstairs by this time.

"No' him," said McMurtrie, "an' between you an' me, miss, I look at him as little as I can for fear he should pit me aff the soldierin'."

"But why?" said Ann surprised.

"This why," said McMurtrie slowly. "It scunners ye when ye think that maybe ye're awa' to dee to save the skin o' sic' an imitation o' a man as he is."

The great box did not go, but the books went in small bundles made up by Ann under the supervision of Miss Emily.

"And be kind enough, Miss Charteris dear, not to say a word about it to Caroline," said the invalid. "When her plans cannot be carried out she gets low-spirited."

So to this day Miss Caroline believes that the huge chest went to the trenches.

McMurtrie's departure, which took place before Miss

Emily was about again, touched both old sisters more nearly than all Ann's reading aloud of horrors. He had been in their service from a boy. They knew all his good and bad points as well as he knew their borders. He had never been an amiable man, but he had been their staunch retainer for many years.

"And what we shall do without him, Emily, I know not," said Miss Caroline when they were discussing it.

Nevertheless, as Ann saw with compunction for former hard thoughts, the head of the house rose admirably to her occasion.

Not only did it never seem to occur to her to refuse McMurtrie permission to go, but laden with every conceivable and inconceivable present he went off after a leave-taking that was quite a ceremony. On his last evening at Bartonsmuir he and his wife, who was very stout and emotional, were entertained to supper in the servants' hall, after which they had to appear with the others in the drawing-room at the evening worship.

"Never was anything so painful," Ann wrote to Lowhampton afterwards, "but Miss Caroline never flinched once, though almost from the beginning Mrs. McMurtrie was sobbing loudly. She read through without a tremor the whole of the first chapter of Joshua and then prayed extempore for twenty minutes, after which we all said good-bye in turn to McMurtrie, who by this time was speechless. I was really sorry for him."

McMurtrie had been gone about a week and his wife installed as gardener when another little wave from the great whirlpool lapped over into their seclusion.

One night when they were sitting at dinner with the blinds up, so that Miss Caroline might see the last of the sunset, the policeman called.

"What can he want at this hour I wonder," said Miss Emily. "Let me go, Caroline."

"Certainly not, Emily," said Miss Caroline rising. "You are still weak from illness."

She then sailed majestically from the room, but was only absent for about five minutes.

When she came in again she closed the door and came forward to the table with the air of one who has important news to deliver.

"What is it, Caroline?" said Miss Emily anxiously.

"Orders have come from headquarters," said Miss Caroline with a kind of relish, "to darken all our windows at sunset on account of probable air raids from Germany."

Ann said nothing as she looked at the two awed faces, though for months before she left Lowhampton they had been darkening the windows. To belittle this event would, she felt, be tactless.

"We had better ring for Arbuthnot," said Miss Caroline next. "We had better ring for all the servants."

A few minutes later accordingly all the maids, Mrs. McMurtrie, and Japp filed in.

Miss Caroline from her high-backed chair then addressed them.

"Friends," she said, "the policeman has just brought me an order from headquarters to darken all our windows. Germans—fiends in the form of Germans," she corrected herself, "have of late been visiting the southern portions of this island in Zeppelins. It is now expected that they may come north here—that even this very night they may hover over us——"

Here Arbuthnot groaned, and Maggie the between-maid just managed to suppress a shriek.

"Hover over us," repeated Miss Caroline firmly, "and drop their diabolical contrivances upon us, so that it is not impossible that this whole house by to-morrow may be in fragments."

At this Mrs. McMurtrie burst into tears and two more of the audience followed her example.

"Tut tut!" said Miss Caroline looking rather pleased than otherwise at the effect she had produced. "This is no way to meet danger. Is it, Emily?"

"No, Caroline," said Miss Emily, "but it is very natural."

"Nevertheless," said Miss Caroline, "I now ask you all to exercise self-control, to follow Arbuthnot upstairs to the attics and to bring down every spare curtain you can find there. If there are no curtains, bring table-cloths. If there are no table-cloths bring—bring anything. The invaders must not find us unprepared. Now go."

Ann was the first, next to Arbuthnot, to reach the top of the attic stairs and the first to come down again with an armful of green damask.

"It was weird to see everybody moving about in the half-light," she wrote afterwards. "Most of the windows had curtains already, but in this queer old house there are all kinds of odd windows. We were working till quite late and then Miss Caroline made me take her round the house outside. We went out by the morning-room window through the rose-garden and back by the lawn, and not a peep of light could we see anywhere either in the house or in the lodges."

Something else took place that night, however, that Ann did not report because her letter was finished before it happened. She had blown out her own light and was leaning on her window-sill, as she always did before going to bed, when she *did* see a distant glimmer. It came, too, from a place where no light should have been even in ordinary circumstances—the old stone summer-house half-overgrown with roses that stood in the corner of the garden just beneath her window.

She waited, hoping she had been mistaken or that the glimmer had been reflected from some other light within the house. But no, again there was a glimmer as of a lighted match. Some one undoubtedly was in the summer-house.

Her first impulse was to go and arouse Miss Caroline. Before she reached her bedroom door, however, she changed her mind. For what, she reflected, could Miss Caroline do,

or Miss Emily, or even Arbuthnot, even if they were awakened, that she could not do herself?

She must at least first reconnoitre before making a disturbance.

Pulling herself together, therefore, she put on her shoes again, flung on a lay coat, and sallied forth. As she went down the stairs she reassured herself as best she could. After all perhaps she *had* imagined the glimmer, or perhaps the policeman who had warned them was resting there and lighting his pipe. This thought gave her courage to cross the ghostly drawing-room to the French window which led directly into the rose-garden. After that the spirit of adventure awoke in her and she grasped the stick that she had brought with her firmly. She was feeling ready to cope with even a German if necessary when the door of the summer-house opened and to her great surprise Japp came out.

She could see him distinctly in the starlight, but he did not see her because he was looking for something on the ground. He was half-kneeling and feeling about upon the gravel.

Instinctively Ann looked down too, and there, close to her foot, was a small white object. She stooped down and picked it up. A candle.

"Is this what you are looking for, Japp?" she said smiling to herself in the darkness as Japp started violently.

So this was all she had to fear? McMurtrie's "imitation o' a man."

"What are you doing here with lights against orders?" she added sternly.

"I—I'll not light it, miss," stammered Japp.

"What are you doing here at all?" continued Ann relentlessly.

"I'm sleepin' here," said the little man.

"Sleeping here?" exclaimed Ann. "But why are you not sleeping in your lodge?"

"Arbuthnot thought it might be better, miss," said Japp;

"in case of a raid occurrin', I would be nearer at hand if I was needed, me bein' the only man about the house."

Ann nearly laughed aloud this time.

"Oh, I see," she said gravely nevertheless. "Well, don't show any more lights."

"But how silly of Arbuthnot," she added to herself as she groped her way upstairs again.

It made her feel sinfully comfortable in her warm bed as she thought of poor Japp doing sentinel. It surprised her, however, when next morning, as she awakened her, Arbuthnot remarked that she had seen "the orra-man" coming out of the summer-house in the early morning and wondered what he had been doing there.

"It's not like him to be so early up," she said.

Ann looked at the old woman. Sincerity was written on every line of her gaunt old face.

"You did not know that he was there then?" she ventured. "You had not told him to go there?"

"*Me*, miss?" exclaimed Arbuthnot amazed. "What would I tell him to go there for?"

Ann said no more, judging it wiser to hold her peace in case of household storms arising. She thought hard nevertheless, but could find no solution of the little mystery of Japp's choice of a sleeping-place.

That night when she again went the rounds with Miss Caroline they passed close by the old summer-house. Nothing indicated that it was occupied, yet Ann had an eerie feeling that Japp was inside, and pictured him watching them from among the shadows. She again said nothing, however, to Miss Caroline, having fallen into Miss Emily's habit of concealing little worries from her. Besides, she argued with herself, what harm could such a nonentity as Japp do anyhow—anywhere?

After this, many weeks passed on eventless at Bartonsmuir, though the world outside was all a riot of fierce passions, and the call for men to go and fight and for women

to take their places at home became every day more and more insistent.

The village when they drove through it on their way to church was a deserted place save for the old people and the children. They always went once a week besides to deposit the household knitting at the parish work-party. Ann sometimes wondered, when she went in with her parcel, what the capable-looking women who sat round the room there thought of some of the Bartonsmuir productions. Miss Caroline's generosity with money, however, prevented any overt criticism, and the Reverend Mr. Gardshore, who saw the good intention behind the bad execution, had even been known to commend her bed-socks.

The minister and his wife, however, were so busy that they seldom had time to come to Bartonsmuir and those weekly confabulations at the door of the hall where the work-party was held were the only opportunities for intercourse with them.

There was a lady doctor in the village in place of the other who had gone to the front, but their relations with her, too, were strictly professional.

"Of course when one thinks of what she must have experienced——" said Miss Emily in excuse for Miss Caroline's dislike to having her invited to dinner.

"That's just why I would like to know her," was on the tip of Ann's tongue. She remembered her place in time, however, and refrained from comment.

None of the neighbours came to see them.

"You see all the people we used to know at the places within calling distance, now that petrol is so scarce," said Miss Emily, "are either gone away or in their graves, and Caroline will not call on the new people."

"Why should I, Emily?" said Miss Caroline. "I know nothing about them."

"And you never will if you never call," Ann again had almost retorted before, once more just in time, she remembered.

It was the humbler neighbours, however, whose acquaintance she coveted most. She longed to take the farm-dogs out for walks that lived just a mile away at the stead-ing. This, however, she was requested not to do as they might follow her home and annoy Rover and Victor, the two house-dogs. These Ancients, as she called them in her letters to David, she spoiled outrageously, but found inadequate as comrades.

"Their names have survived their characters," she said. "Rover only roves now as far as the gate. Nothing will induce him to go an inch further. As for Victor—*he* rests on his laurels."

She longed too to go and chat with the ploughmen's wives and the village-folk two miles away on the other side. But beyond giving money to Mr. Gardshore for distribution and sending Arbuthnot to make inquiries in cases of illness or bereavement Miss Caroline did nothing in the way of visiting them either. Nor would she allow Miss Emily to do anything.

"No, Emily," she would say. "You are not fitted for a philanthropist. You are so kind-hearted and so easily taken in that you would inevitably do more harm than good."

This, she said, applied also to Ann, who had strict injunctions to leave all this kind of visiting to Arbuthnot.

"We must think of their benefit before our own pleasure," she would add. "You know, Emily, George used to remark that being kind to people is apt to become mere selfishness."

"Now who *is* George?" thought Ann, and she hated him whoever he was when from the top of the highest dune she looked across the moor towards the village. It would have been some outlet at least to have visited the people there. She imagined all kinds of things going on in that little huddle of red roofs with the old grey spire at the end of it—comings and goings, rejoicings and weepings. People were *living* there. At Bartonsmuir they were only existing.

She would stand sometimes looking over at it till the darkness closed down and lights carefully curtained glowed

in the cottage windows. Then she would go speeding home across the moor to spend the evening in the warm pot-pourri-scented drawing-room, knitting again, knitting, knitting, and picking up stitches and hair-pins for Miss Caroline.

It seemed to Ann at these times that the call from outside came in after her and tore at her very heart-strings, rousing reverberations there that sounded loud through everything, through her consideration for her old mistresses, through her affection for David, through even her duty to her beloved dead.

At last after a letter from David in which he told her that he had joined the R.A.M.C. and might be called up at any moment, one March night when the wind was howling in the chimneys and lashing the woods to fury, she could no more contain herself.

Her two mistresses and she were seated in the drawing-room as on the first night of all, and Ann had been reading the evening news aloud to them, when suddenly she threw down the paper and exclaimed——

"Oh, isn't it *terrible* to be doing nothing at all to help?"

Both her hearers stopped working and Miss Caroline dropped at least half-a-dozen stitches.

"*Nothing*, Miss Charteris?" she said dumbfounded.

"Yes, nothing," said Ann letting herself go at last. "For what is a little bit of knitting in comparison to what *I* might do, for instance?"

She started up from her seat with her hands clasped in front of her as though imploring their comprehension.

"You see it's nothing for you," she went on; "it isn't always calling to you and calling to you. You could not go out to do hard work even if you would."

"You mean," said Miss Emily, "that *you* could, Miss Charteris dear, and that that is what is annoying you."

"Annoying me!" cried Ann passionately. "It is more than I can bear sometimes. You see," she went on before

Miss Emily could break in again, "you and Miss Caroline don't really need me, Miss Emily."

"In that you are mistaken, Miss Charteris," said Miss Caroline suddenly in a strange gruff voice.

"Oh, yes, Miss Charteris dear," chimed in Miss Emily.

"Ah, you are good to say so," said Ann, "but I know it is not true. I am a luxury, as four out of your five maids are luxuries. Ah, do you not see how you and people like you—good, kind, dear people—are keeping back hundreds of workers?"

For a moment there was a palpitating silence. The room seemed all a-thrill with the shock of Ann's last speech. Then the practical Miss Emily spoke.

"But what would you have us do, Miss Charteris dear?" she said soothingly. "If any of them want to leave they have only got to say so of course."

"I know, I know," said Ann calming a little.

"With regard to yourself it is a different matter, however," Miss Emily went on. "Doctor Warren told us why you were here—in order to pay off debts. It is a sacred duty."

"Yes, yes," said Ann. "I want to make money—but I have been thinking—they—those who are gone—would understand if I waited with that till after the war—the need for workers is so great—so urgent. They would be the first to understand, and though I should hate to leave you——"

"Don't do it. Don't even say it," said Miss Caroline suddenly again. "Give me time. Give me only time. Even till breakfast-time I believe would be enough."

She was leaning forward in her seat, her pearl tassels quivering, her pale eyes fixed glassily upon the opposite wall.

"Caroline," said Miss Emily whenever she looked at her, "is it——?"

"Yes, it is, Emily," said Miss Caroline. "And if you will

not be too tired to read prayers to-night," she added after a moment, "I should prefer to go now to my room."

Without another word she rose, dropping as she did so her entire knitting upon the carpet. Then she stepped slowly towards the door. As though remembering something, however, she halted there with her hand already on the handle.

"I wish to make my starting-point clear," she said. "It is that neither you nor I, Emily, justify our existence at this crisis by our personal usefulness."

"Oh, Miss Caroline," cried Ann, jumping up again distressed. "I did not mean that. Indeed I didn't."

"My dear Miss Charteris," said Miss Caroline, "I know better than you do what you meant, for this reason, that for some time I have been thinking the same thing myself. Your words to-night have merely served as a match to a fire already laid for lighting."

Here she paused for a moment regarding the leg of a table fixedly as though her cogitations had already begun. Then opening the door suddenly——

"I am glad it is a windy night," she said. "I always think better in wind. Good night, Miss Charteris, good night, Emily."

With these words she took her departure, leaving behind her another palpitating silence.

Ann still stood looking towards the door. She was possessed by remorse and self-reproach. It seemed to her as though she had just been wantonly cruel to these two harmless creatures. After all if they were personally useless was it for her to point out the fact? It was as though she had held up a mirror in malice before their insufficiencies. Had the war then, besides depriving her of all she loved best in the world, bereft her finally of common sense? Had the call from without made her forget the duty of protection she owed to these two old people?

Miss Emily's voice interrupted her troubled thoughts.

"Sit down, Miss Charteris dear," she said. "There is

no need to worry I assure you. We had better ring for Arbuthnot now in case I should forget to tell her after prayers about the hot milk."

Ann rang the bell twice as was the custom, and after an interval Arbuthnot entered.

"Miss Caroline will be requiring the large scuttleful of coals and the milk to-night, Arbuthnot," said Miss Emily.

"You see, Miss Charteris dear," she added afterwards with a sigh, "when an idea comes at night like that dear Caroline seldom sleeps till morning."

She sat idle for a moment looking over her spectacles at the fire.

"Ever since she was engaged to the late Mr. George Torphichen it has been like that," she went on at last. "Before that they did not worry her—the ideas I mean—but since then she has felt obliged always to work them out to their conclusions."

"So this is who George was," said Ann to herself.

"That is his portrait over her bedroom mantelpiece," Miss Emily continued presently, going on with her knitting again. "He was minister of the parish church, and very, *very* clever. Our father unfortunately—disliked him. Indeed we never dared to tell him that they were engaged. He—my father—had such a violent temper."

Miss Emily shook her head over the memory.

"And George so hated scenes," she went on. "We decided to wait until he was transferred to a more important parish. Meantime he used to teach Caroline logic among the dunes. That was their courting—he teaching and she learning. He would preach his next Sunday's sermons to her while I kept watch in case any one should interrupt. Ah, yes, these were trying times. But they're all past now—long, long past."

"He died?" said Ann softly.

"Yes, he wasn't strong, you know," said Miss Emily, "and the cold east winds—— One day they had sat too

long, and that very night he took very ill and in a few days was dead."

"How sad!" said Ann.

"Yes, Miss Charteris dear," said Miss Emily. "But though it is wicked to say it—oh dear it was a relief! You see—it seems very unkind even to think it—but I am sure my father would never have allowed it. Poor George was so very—so very——"

"Unsuitable?" suggested Ann.

Miss Emily nodded and then shook her head expressively.

"But he was quite a genius," she hastened to add, "and that's what attracted Caroline. Like to like. And he certainly taught her to think, and not to be satisfied till she comes to some conclusion, though many a time I have wished he hadn't—poor, *poor* George!"

. . . Ann, too, that night wished that the unsuitable George had not taught Miss Caroline logic, as she lay awake unable to sleep for remorse and the wind which was keeping every door and window in the old house creaking and rattling.

Several times through the turmoil she heard the sound of talking, and once, rising to reconnoitre, she found that it came from the open door of Miss Emily's bedroom. Creeping nearer along the corridor she stood for a moment or two where she could see Miss Caroline's shadow on the wall and hear her voice raised in exposition.

"No, Emily," she heard her say. "The argument that we are as useful as we can be, because we give our money away to war-funds, is of no use except to prove that the sooner we are out of existence the better, as what we give away is nothing to what we might bequeathe."

"This is fearful," thought Ann. "Is she thinking of committing suicide?"

But somehow, and this comforted her, she could not imagine Miss Caroline committing anything so crude. The mere suggestion, however, gave the deliberations in process from that time forth a new and painful interest. Ann found

herself awake now not only because of her recollections but because of her apprehension as to what Miss Caroline might think of next. As though she were awaiting the crisis of an illness every sound in the house now became of extraordinary importance. When the talking in Miss Emily's bedroom at last ceased and she heard Miss Caroline's soft yet heavy foot-falls in the corridor, she fairly bounded up into a sitting position in her excitement. But Miss Caroline did not come in. All that she saw of her was the glimmer of her candle as she passed. Unable to lie down again just then, however, Ann rose and went along the passage after her. The bedroom door was ajar when she reached it, and quietly pushing it open she peeped in.

Miss Caroline, in a gorgeous dressing-gown of her own design and a white frilled night-cap, was seated in front of a roaring fire sipping milk out of a steaming tumbler which she held on a diminutive silver salver. From an oval black frame above the mantelpiece the faded portrait of a raw-boned youth, with a very long upper lip and dressed in the clerical garb of more than half a century ago, looked down critically and rather sourly upon her deliberations. Between sips she sat motionless for lengthened periods looking fixedly at the blaze, with her head cocked on one side as though she were listening to the rumbling of the wind in the chimney.

"But, in reality, I suppose she is working It out," thought Ann, and for the first time curiosity about the idea *as* an idea awoke within her. She went back to bed wondering what it was, and lay awake weighing probabilities and possibilities, until mental exhaustion and the sough of the storm combined sent her at last into a sound slumber.

She was awakened at six o'clock by Arbuthnot who came as an emissary from Miss Caroline. The Mistress would be obliged if Miss Charteris would meet her as soon as possible in Miss Emily's bedroom.

Ann needed no second telling. She sprang out of bed, and hardly waiting to put on slippers and throw on a dressing-

gown she hastened to the rendezvous. There she found Miss Caroline seated by another blazing fire and sipping another glass of milk. Miss Emily was still in bed. She had a pinched and all-night air as she sat propped up with pillows under the canopy of her great four-poster. She nodded inattentively in response to Ann's good morning. There was a tense look of expectation in her little tired, anxious eyes. She kept them fixed on her sister and Ann sat in suspense too, while Miss Caroline, with an air of thorough enjoyment, finished her refreshment to the last drop in silence.

Then, however, setting down her empty tumbler, she motioned to Ann to take a seat opposite to her.

"Miss Charteris and Emily," she then began, "you will be glad to hear that my new idea is now, so far as I can manage it alone, complete. My arrangement is made. It now only remains to carry it into execution, and for that I shall require not only your co-operation but that of this entire household."

Here she paused for consideration.

"Whatever is it?" thought Ann, and glancing towards Miss Emily she saw her swallow painfully and draw her Shetland shawl more closely round her.

"I began, as you are already aware," Miss Caroline went on, "by considering our own position, and, listening as I did so to the storm outside, the name Wrack-straws suggested itself to me. It may not be original, but it is eminently apt. That is what you and I are just now Emily, in this great storm that is shaking Europe—Wrack-straws—flying before the wind—of no use to any one—fit only for some rubbish-corner."

At another time Ann, as she reflected afterwards, would have smiled at Miss Caroline in her voluminous robes likening herself to such insubstantialities. At the moment, however, she had no difficulty in being serious, and she heard Miss Emily swallow once again.

"If this were all," Miss Caroline went on, "we might

remain as we are and make no difference to anybody. But this is not all. As you, Miss Charteris, very rightly put it, we are obstructing the usefulness of at least half-a-dozen other people."

Here Ann would have interrupted, but Miss Emily forestalled her.

"You said seven last night, Caroline," she said. "You remember there is Mrs. McMurtrie."

"I now purposely exclude her," said Miss Caroline. "We shall need her ourselves."

"Oh, Caroline!" exclaimed Miss Emily imploringly, "would it not be better to exclude Arbuthnot, rather? Mrs. McMurtie is such a *very* incapable person!"

"It is for that reason that I exclude her," said Miss Caroline. "In retaining her we should be keeping back practically nothing from the public service."

"Oh, dear," groaned Miss Emily, "I do wish the war was over!"

"But, Miss Caroline——" Ann had only time to say before Miss Caroline waved her into silence.

"Hear me to the end first," she said. "I had thought this all out when a new idea suddenly occurred to me, or rather the old idea suddenly developed into a new phase. I remembered that we—you, Emily, and I—were not the only Wrack-straws in existence."

She paused impressively, but her audience waited for more, Miss Emily hugging her Shetland shawl tighter, Ann pushing her hair back from her forehead.

"I remembered numbers of people," Miss Caroline went on, "rich like ourselves, personally useless like ourselves, wrack-straws like ourselves, who are cornering labour."

"Yes, yes, Caroline," said Miss Emily eagerly. "There's Julia Corstorphine for one. She has six servants, and anybody more personally useless than she is you couldn't find. She can't even knit badly."

"Who are cornering labour," Miss Caroline repeated, glaring reproachfully at the interruption, "and the thought

suddenly came to me, why not corner *them*—why not stack them all together?”

“Eh?” said Miss Emily bewildered.

“Why not stack them?” repeated Miss Caroline, “collect them, sweep them out of the way, and make the same labour suffice for all of them, thus increasing our usefulness and lessening their obstructiveness?”

Miss Emily’s face was still a blank, but Ann leaned forward eagerly.

“I see, I see, Miss Caroline!” she exclaimed. “You will invite some here to Bartonsmuir and Arbuthnot and the maids and I will attend to them.”

Miss Caroline beamed.

“Smart girl!” she said approvingly. “You at least should be satisfied for your work will be increased five-fold. Instead of only us two you will have ten people to be companion to!”

“I shall do it willingly,” said Ann, all enthusiasm. “How clever of you to think of it, Miss Caroline! Just imagine, if they have all six servants like Miss Corstorphine, we shall be releasing sixty people.”

“Certainly,” rejoined Miss Caroline, “that is if we can get ten in, and I am sure we can. The attics can be fitted up. Well, Emily,” she added, turning towards the bed, “you are saying nothing. What do you say to it?”

“Well, Caroline,” said Miss Emily, “it isn’t a question of what I will say. You know what I always say. It’s a question of what *they* will——”

“Who? The servants?” said Miss Caroline sharply.

“No, the—the Wrack-straws,” said Miss Emily.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

WHICH BEGINS WITH POLITE LITERATURE AND ENDS
WITH AN ORDINARY TAPER

Two days later, after hours spent in consultation and composition, ten letters went forth from Bartonsmuir, and in due course the replies received made manifest what the Wrack-straws said to Miss Caroline's proposal.

The first reply was from Miss Julia Corstorphine whom Miss Emily had described as a typical Wrack-straw. It was therefore rather disconcerting. It was written by her secretary.

"Miss Corstorphine presents her compliments to Miss Barton and regrets that she cannot accept her kind invitation to reside at Bartonsmuir during the period of the war, as she does not consider herself qualified to claim a share of the benefits offered. Only yesterday she opened a bazaar in the Corstorphine Hall at Netherton and was told by the provost in his vote of thanks that she was the most helpful member of the community. She therefore cannot reconcile it with her conscience to usurp the place of one who is so unfortunate as to be personally useless."

"I always did dislike votes of thanks," said Miss Emily. "They are so misleading, and now see what harm they do! The very woman who should have been here thinks herself 'not qualified.' But don't let us say anything about it yet to Caroline, Miss Charteris dear."

Ann heartily agreed. She had been deputed by both her mistresses to open all the replies that came and break the news good or bad to them. She kept Miss Julia Corstorphine's letter in her pocket for two days, and was glad she had done so when three very encouraging letters came

which more than counterbalanced the mortification of Miss Corstorphine's refusal.

The first Ann opened was written in a big untidy hand with lines running aslant across the pages.

"BUSHFORD HOUSE, NETHERTON.

"DEAREST CAROLINE," Ann read aloud—

"Your most interesting letter containing your most ingenious suggestion was handed to me this evening as I and three friends were just sitting down to a game of bridge. I immediately put it before them, and for an hour or so we discussed its merits. Julia Corstorphine happened to be one of my guests and mentioned that she had had a similar letter which she had answered in the negative and also in the third person. But, dear Caroline, no one, I hope, minds her. My other two guests did not, I assure you. They were Mrs. Pitmirran of Nutting, who is a Wrack-straw of the worst type, having not only servants galore but two motors and a carriage as well. She has consented to accompany me. Also Mrs. Fennimore of Flails whom I think you have met—who must be near eighty, but who looks about twenty from behind because of the transformations she always wears. We three, feeling convicted—as the revivalists say—of being worse than useless in the present crisis, all wish to give your experiment a fair trial. We have agreed, therefore, to make new wills as soon as possible leaving all our money to war-funds and then to proceed together to Bartonsmuir, where we hope to arrive, dear Caroline, all by our lonesomes in about a week.—Yours affectionately, MAUD BELLAIRS."

"There, Caroline!" cried Miss Emily in high delight.

Miss Caroline, however, received the news almost coldly.

"It will depend," she said, "upon the other replies whether we shall be able to accommodate Mrs. Pitmirran and Mrs. Fennimore. I had not included them in my estimate."

"Then how fortunate it is," exclaimed Miss Emily at

once, "that Julia Corstorphine has refused to come, Caroline!"

"Refused?" said Miss Caroline incredulously.

"Yes—and so has Mrs. Turnham Dodd," chimed in Ann hastily, eager to get another disclosure over. "At least," she corrected herself, "this is a letter from her niece—'Miss Turnham Dodd in the name of her late aunt——'"

"*Late!*" exclaimed both the Miss Bartons.

"'Her late aunt,'" repeated Ann, "'thanks Miss Caroline Barton for her invitation, but is surprised to see it nevertheless, not only because of the nature of it, but considering the intimation which appeared in last Thursday's *Scotsman*.'" "

"This is terrible, Caroline," said Miss Emily. "How could we have missed it? Poor, *poor* Matilda Turnham Dodd! Well, after all she was ninety-three and would have been a great responsibility."

"Thursday was the day we sent out the invitations," said Miss Caroline as though in soliloquy. "Still it should not have happened."

"It was all my fault," said Ann. "I forgot to read the notices that day. If I had I should at once have recognised the name. Here is a letter from another niece, from a Miss Ellen Eldershaw."

"Oh, Ellen Eldershaw?" exclaimed Miss Emily. "Well—and what does Ellen say? We have never seen her, but her sister was at school with us and if there ever was a Wrack-straw upon earth it was that sister of hers. So, from all I hear, is this one whether or not she realises it. Read on, Miss Charteris dear."

"Dear Miss Caroline," Ann read, "I am directed by my aunt, Miss Eldershaw, to thank you very much indeed for your kind invitation to come and reside at Bartonsmuir for the period of the war. She is unable yet to give a decided answer to it, but she thoroughly appreciates and admires the manner in which you are supplying one of the

most urgent needs of the present day and hopes that so long as it is possible you will keep a place open for her.—Yours sincerely, E. ELDERSHAW, JUNR.”

“The aunt may be doubtful,” said Miss Emily, “but the niece is quite certain what she wants her to do. You may count upon Ellen Eldershaw anyhow, Caroline. She will never be able to help coming if the niece wants her to whatever she may think herself.”

“Then,” said Ann, who had opened another letter, “here is an answer from a Miss Gellatly. Her servants have all been quarreling so intolerably since her German butler was interned that she is glad of any excuse to shut up her house for a time. She has given them notice in a body and recommended them to go and do munition-making, though she hopes for the sake of their fellow-workers that no two of them will be engaged in the same factory.”

“Then we have now,” said Miss Emily, ticking the names off on her fingers, “Mrs. Bellairs, Mrs. Pitmirran, Mrs. Fennimore, Miss Eldershaw, and Miss Gellatly. Have the Miss Wanlesses not answered yet, Miss Charteris dear?”

“They will—not be coming,” said Ann, her eyes meeting Miss Emily’s for a moment. “Nor will the Miss Killigrews. I have burned their letters.”

“Then that makes all the replies,” said Miss Emily with determined cheerfulness. “Caroline, all the replies are in. Five Wrack-straws are coming. That will give them each two rooms.”

“Far too much,” said Miss Caroline discontentedly. “We must have occupants for these other rooms. If only five are to come then the plan will be only half carried out. We must think of more names, Emily.”

The “we” Ann supposed was a figure of speech. Miss Caroline at all events did not think much that evening. Probably she considered that she had already done enough thinking. Anyhow in the interval between dinner-time and prayer-time she made up considerably for her night

of wakefulness, and, save for occasional whispered discussions between Ann and Miss Emily, hour after hour passed in unbroken silence.

At prayer-time, however, Miss Caroline awoke to some purpose.

When they all rose from their knees they were asked to sit down again, and then she announced to the servants for the first time the part they were expected to play in the immediate future.

Ann, watching the amazed faces, guessed something of the shock it was to them to hear that so many strange mistresses were coming into the house. Yet all was still until the cook rose to her feet. Fortunately, she was too angry to get under way for a moment and in that moment Arbuthnot rushed into the breach, if that could be called rushing which was so deliberate. Probably she alone had known or guessed what was coming, and had prepared herself to meet the emergency.

Anyhow she made quite a speech.

With her eye on the cook, she reminded them of the long years that most of them had lived at and received kindness from Bartonsmuir. She then reminded them that it was the duty of every one to do special work at this cruel time, and that they might count themselves lucky, some of them, that it was only stew-pans and not explosive bombs that they were asked to handle. She then proceeded to say, that after the experience of mistresses that they had had they need none of them surely be afraid of having the number of them increased. If they were all like the Miss Bartons, these ten ladies that were coming, the attendance on them would be a pleasure. (Here there was great applause, and the cook visibly softened.) And whatever they were, in any case, Arbuthnot went on to conclude, whatever the Miss Bartons thought fit to order in these cruel times would be carried out by the household to the best of their ability, and this she herself would answer for.

This closed the proceedings for there was no vote of

thanks, Miss Caroline evidently considering that none was needed, and the staff, without further comment in that place at least, parted for the night pledged to exert themselves to the uttermost.

It was after all this, when the three of them were having biscuits, that Miss Emily said——

“What about asking Lottie Alleyne, Caroline?”

“As a Wrack-straw?” said Miss Caroline.

“My dear Caroline, of course not!” exclaimed Miss Emily. “Surely a woman who runs canteens, and prisoners’ parcels, and soldiers’ mending, and—and—everything in a country town, besides entertaining people from billets and uncomfortable camps, from morning till night, week in, week out, and having wounded relatives staying constantly as well, is *not* a Wrack-straw?”

“No, I suppose not,” said Miss Caroline dejectedly.

“But she may know of some, Caroline,” Miss Emily hastened to add.

“Yes, and be glad to dispose of them,” said Miss Caroline brightening. “Kindly write to her, Miss Charteris.”

“Mrs. Alleyne, The Gables, Rathness, is her address,” said Miss Emily. “She is our niece, Miss Charteris dear—once one of the prettiest and naughtiest of nieces, still one of the most affectionate and generous-hearted.”

“I shall write to her at once,” said Ann with enthusiasm.

And not only did she do so, but, unknown to her two mistresses, who might have worried about her in their beds, she went out afterwards and posted the letter. Two miles she went to the village post-office in the faint light of a half-moon. Nothing interesting happened to her, however, either going or returning.

The letter thus romantically posted at dead of night arrived at dusk on the following evening at its destination, and was laid by Johnson amongst others on the hall table, where it reposed for an hour and a half before any one so much as looked at it.

Mrs. Alleyne was in the drawing-room all that afternoon surrounded by men in khaki for the most part and all the women and girls that she could muster who at the moment were not working at something. The number of these fluctuated. Some in V.A.D. uniforms had to run away before tea, others rushed in just in time for it, but had to go off to the needle-work guild afterwards, others again had to take their turn at the canteen. A fair proportion, however, remained to entertain and to be entertained, and of these Evelyn Gardyne was soon the centre. She was a school-girl home for her Easter holidays, who could sing and play, as Mrs. Alleyne said, "Anything." She could chatter, too, and had the kind of voice that is heard through any amount of talking.

"Yes, wasn't it fun?" Fred Lorimer heard her say as he handed cups of tea to belated new-comers. "It was just about this time last year when we were coming north and at St. Pancras a soldier got into Miss Brownrigg's 'Ladies Only' carriage. She spoke to him and he took no notice. He was asleep or faint I think. At any rate he looked awfully ill. But Miss B. was determined to have him turned out. Indeed, she had told me to call the guard, when what do you think happened? A girl, who was sitting in another corner, started up—such a pretty girl—and said—

"'If there is room elsewhere as you say, go yourselves there, rather than disturb this man who has been to *hell* to keep you comfortable!'

"I wish you had seen Miss Brownrigg's face and our faces, too, for that matter."

She turned lightly to the piano again.

"Miss Gardyne," said Fred under cover of some laughter, "you don't happen to know the name of that girl, do you?"

"Oh dear, no," laughed Evelyn. "She did not give us time to get to know her. We all trooped off then as meek as lambs to another carriage and did not see her again."

As she spoke her eyes met his and she became aware of

an eager light in them. At the same moment he became aware of her awareness.

"Do sing this now, won't you?" he said, hastily taking up a song at random.

"Certainly if you wish it," she said, blushing a little as she played the opening bars. She had never seen that light in his eyes before and it was rather wonderful. What if—well stranger things had happened—and Mrs. Alleyne, she was sure, would like it—otherwise why should she invite her so often to the Gables to play to Mr. Lorimer?

A little breathlessly she began to sing—

"Come to me in the silence of the night,
Come in the speaking silence of a dream.
Come with soft rounded cheeks and eyes as bright
As sunlight on a stream . . .
Come back in tears, come back in tears,
Oh, mem'ry, hope, love, of former years. . . ."

The tremor of nervousness in the clear girlish voice lent to the passionate words a curiously poignant charm. There was dead silence round the singer when she began the second verse. Even the talkers at the other end of the room stopped to listen.

"Come back to me in dreams that I may live
My very life again though cold in death.
Come back to me in dreams that I may give
Pulse for pulse, breath for breath . . .
Come back to me in dreams!
Speak low, lean low,
As long ago my love—so long ago."

"My dear Fred," said Mrs. Alleyne when the after-silence had ended in applause, "if you intend to take that cup of tea to Mrs. Baxter, pray do so before it gets quite cold."

Fred started and spilled some tea as he went.

"I never could stand Lord Henry Somerset's songs," said Mrs. Baxter as he handed her the half-depleted cup.

Afterwards he remembered noting quite mechanically

that she had an aggressive lower jaw, but he could not remember answering anything to her remark, and wondered if he had been rude.

Mrs. Baxter was in no doubt as to that.

"Mr. Lorimer has not improved," she said to her hostess. "I suppose he thinks that for a V.C. manners are unnecessary."

"What has he been doing?" said Mr. Alleyne.

"Didn't you see?" said Mrs. Baxter. "He spilled half my tea, handed me nothing to eat, and went away while I was talking to him."

"You must excuse him," said Mrs. Alleyne. "He has had a bad time and, though he looks so fit, he is not himself yet."

"Well for his friends' sake I hope not," said Mrs. Baxter.

"Yet it's not like Fred," said Mrs. Alleyne to herself. "Is it possible that he and Evelyn——"

"May I have some more tea?" said somebody else, and she had no more time to think that afternoon.

Meantime Fred had seated himself in a dilapidated old chair that he specially loved, all alone in front of the smoking-room fire, an unlighted match between his fingers, an unlighted cigarette between his lips. Many a time during the weeks he had spent at the Gables making a desperately slow recovery he had sat in that chair alone with his dreams and imaginings. All, however, had been but shadowy things compared to this evening's vivid realities. For one brief moment the curtain had been lifted. The girl whose face night and day was haunting him had stood before him speaking, living. Then the song had intervened that had driven him crazy for the moment. Was it possible that never again he was to see the unknown girl who had protected him in his extremity? In all future days was she destined to be merely his love of long ago? The thought was intolerable. Was she only to come back in dreams? To speak low—lean low—only in dreams?

"Then I can't stand it," he said to himself quite quietly.

It had come to that. He was possessed. Without this girl with the russet hair and the tears on her eyelashes life was nothing—friendship was nothing. . . . She had said—for, of course, it was she—it must have been she whom that girl had seen in the railway carriage—that he had been to hell. Again to-night she might say the same. He was there now, and all for the sake of her who did not care a button about him. For, of course, she did not care. She only cared for the other man who had died or been wounded or something, and for whose sake she had been kind to him. If she had cared anything she would, at least, have left some indication of where to find her, some address, some message—not a rug without an initial even. She would have looked out for the advertisement he had put in all the papers for the owner of the rug and have sent some answer.

After all she must be a heartless creature not to think of what he might feel about it. . . . But then those tears trembling on her eyelashes. . . . She was not heartless, only maddeningly stupid not to know what harm she was doing. . . . For how could a man get well ever—mentally well at least—in the state he was in? He could not get well for longing for her. He would die in the end very likely like Jimmy Green in Barbara Allen—a nice ending for a V.C.—futile—idiotic. . . . Yet what other end could there be to this fever of the soul that had possession of him, that conjured her up before him at every turn, in every twilight, in every dawning, worst of all that made her partner with him in every little daily happening.

Yet physically he was strong again. She would not know him now if she saw him. The wreck she had taken care of all that wonderful night—emaciated, unshaven, with blood-shot eyes—he shuddered as he thought of himself then—had vanished. Now in the mirror above the mantelpiece he could see himself, clean-shaven again, clear-eyed, good to look at. The sight thrilled him for a moment with a sense of his own power. . . . Ah, if he could but

meet her—could but look once more into her eyes, perhaps he might be able to make her forget that other man! At least she would be sorry for him again, for she would know how desperately he needed her.

But he would never see her. She would never know what she had done to him. Things happened like that in this accursed world and a man must go on, if he were a man at all, just as if his heart were not sick within him. Well, anyhow it might not last long for him. A week or two more and there was the Front again and death perhaps. . . . Then if spirits were free, as some said they were, he might find her once more—see her across the great gulf fixed—make himself known perhaps.

At this point, however, he had a sudden revulsion of feeling.

He sprang to his feet.

"I'm getting absolutely maudlin," he exclaimed aloud.

Then shaking himself down and pulling his tie straight, he went back to the drawing-room to make himself agreeable to his aunt's guests.

He was too late however. The guests had all gone. Only the hostess was left in the drawing-room sitting in front of the fire reading letters.

"Is that you, Fred?" she said without looking up. "Come and let me scold you. You have mortally offended Mrs. Baxter."

"I was afraid I had," said Fred, establishing himself near her. "But as you told me she always did take offence at everybody sooner or later, I didn't think it mattered."

"Not to you perhaps," said Mrs. Alleyne. "But I have had to make it up to her. And I am glad to say that you will have to suffer too. I have had to invite that uncle of hers—old Mr. Tosh—to dinner."

Fred groaned.

"Surely not the man," he said, "who is writing a book *now* called 'The Utter Impossibility of Germany ever going to war with Britain'?"

"He had begun it, you see, in 1912, poor man," said Mrs. Alleyne. "He has changed the title now to 'The Utter Impossibility of Annihilating Germany.'"

"Bah!" said Fred, "he doesn't know what he is writing about."

His aunt watched him for a moment over the letter she was reading as he lay back in his chair frowning heavily at the fire.

"It is strange to see you turned soldier, Fred," she said at last; "you—the student—all for toleration and internationalism."

"Ah—that was before I had seen things," said Fred.

His thin face seemed to sharpen and grow more lined as she looked at it. The eyes under the frowning brows reflected the glow of the fire. At last, as though something intolerable to behold were there pictured, he closed them for a moment and sat up in his chair.

Then, finding her watching him, he smiled rather wryly at her.

"Surely you don't mean to tell me that only old Tosh is coming?" he said in a tone she had learned to know well. It meant that there was to be no more talk of the war just then.

"Did you expect Mrs. Baxter?" she laughed. "She is going to the canteen, my dear. That is why I had to ask him here. She says some of the servants always give notice after he has dined there alone he is so bad-tempered."

"Mrs. Baxter going to the canteen?" exclaimed Fred. "But I thought she had quarrelled with every one there?"

"So she has," said Mrs. Alleyne. "I've only just managed to patch things up between her and Mrs. Wilkinson this afternoon. They are going together to-night along with Mrs. Coulter who has tact enough to get on with Bengal tigers. What I should do without dear kind Mrs. Coulter to act as padding between some of these people I can't think."

"Well, but who is coming here to act as padding between

me and old Tosh?" asked Fred. "I must at least have Piffard. I hope you have asked Piffard?"

"He asked himself," said Mrs. Alleyne. "He said you would be sure to want him for a fourth at bridge. And for a wonder he is off duty to-night."

"Good old Piffard!" said Fred. "When we get sick of bridge, as we soon shall with Tosh playing, he can refresh us with his detective stories."

"Yes," said Mrs. Alleyne absently, for she was becoming absorbed in one of her letters.

"It must be fun being a detective," Fred went on. "If we both come through this scrimmage with enough of us left intact, Piffard and I might go into partnership."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Alleyne again.

"You're not attending," said Fred looking up. "You're taking no interest in me. Don't read any more letters."

"Spoiled boy!" laughed Mrs. Alleyne. "But I must just read this one. It's too amusing. Wait. I'll read it aloud to you. It's from a dear old aunt of mine, Caroline Barton of Bartonsmuir, who used to try to bring me up once."

"What a disappointment you must have been to her!" said Fred.

"Well this is written by her companion," said his aunt. "Dear Mrs. Alleyne," she went on reading aloud, "I have been asked by Miss Caroline Barton to inform you that she has arranged to receive at Bartonsmuir ten personally useless people who are doing harm at this crisis by appropriating labour which is urgently needed elsewhere. By assembling these Wrack-straws, as she calls them, here she makes it possible for them all to be attended by the same servants. They will pay their own expenses and will have the services of the Bartonsmuir staff which includes, besides the usual maids, a motor-man and a companion."

"Five Wrack-straws have already intimated their arrival, but five rooms still remain vacant. Miss Caroline, therefore, would be obliged if you will send her by return the names

and addresses of any you think might care to avail themselves of this opportunity. If all ten places are occupied she hopes that at least fifty capable persons will be set free for state service—each Wrack-straw having had on an average five or six attendants.—Yours sincerely, ANN CHARTERIS, *Secretary.*"

"Now isn't that delicious?" said Mrs. Alleyne.

"Is it a joke?" said Fred.

"Not a bit of it," she replied. "It's Aunt Caroline all over. The Wrack-straws! Who else would have thought of it?"

"The companion must be an enthusiast, too," said Fred, taking the letter into his hand and looking at the neat rather hurried writing, "to think of being companion to ten more people. She would need to have the tact of a Mrs. Coulter."

At the word his aunt suddenly seized his arm.

"Fred," she exclaimed. "I wonder if Mrs. Baxter would go."

"Never," said Fred. "Besides she has her uncle to look after, hasn't she?"

"He wouldn't mind," said Mrs. Alleyne. "He'd be far happier in rooms with his man somewhere than alternately being neglected and made an excuse of. She's a Wrack-straw besides, if ever there was one, and always flying in people's faces. She is as wealthy as those others, too, and has as many half-idle domestics."

"Send in her name then," said Fred. "No saying what might happen. That kind of person always likes to be doing something new. Only if you want her to go, don't let her know you do."

"I shall tell her nothing," said Mrs. Alleyne, "but I shall write at once to Miss Charteris." She paused for a moment looking at the letter again. "Who I believe," she added with a little laugh, "is engaged to a man who wanted to marry *me* once."

Something in the smiling eyes that met his arrested Fred's attention—something he understood.

"Lottie!" he exclaimed, forgetting the "aunt" as he often did.

"Yes," she said nodding. "I was a silly little fool once."

"But now——" said Fred.

"Now you see it's an old story," she laughed, "and he has forgotten and so should I, of course."

"But can you—does one ever forget, Lottie?" he said.

She looked at him curiously for a moment.

Then she sprang up.

"Not so far as I know," she laughed. "But now, dear boy, I must get that letter written."

They did not meet again till just before dinner when she reappeared in what she called her evergreen gown.

"At whom are you setting your emeralds?" said Fred as he made her a low obeisance on the hearth-rug. "Is it old Tosh or is it Piffard?"

"You ridiculous boy," she said. "It was on your account I put them on. They are the Alleyne emeralds and are to be handed to your wife when you marry."

She was startled to see how his face changed at the word, but her surprise did not appear in her kindly eyes.

"To my wife?" he whispered.

"Yes, dear," she answered, "and I hope to goodness you'll find her as soon as you can, for these green stones are a constant anxiety to me. If I didn't love to wear them sometimes I'd have them put into the bank for safety. Old Margaret is always advising me to do that."

At this moment Johnson opened the door.

"Mr. Tosh's man is here, m'm," he said, "asking if you would let him know if it's all right that he should come back at nine for him."

"But surely," said Mrs. Alleyne, "he must take his orders from his master."

"His master always forgets, he says, what the orders was, m'm," said Johnson.

"So he wants me to countersign them?" laughed Mrs. Alleyne. "Where is the man?"

"Here, m'm," said Johnson. "Here, Albert!"

A stout, pale, rather handsome man, with sleek fair hair and sleepy-looking eyes, instantly and noiselessly appeared.

"Excuse me, m'm," he said in a subdued well-trained voice, "but the last time I fetched Mr. Tosh at the time he had ordered there was quite a scene. Then when I waited longer and was not there at the hour there was a worse scene. So I just slipped round beforehand to-night to see what you would think best to be done, m'm. It makes unpleasantness in the party when he loses his temper the way he does, m'm. Now to-night he said nine."

"Nine does seem early," said Mrs. Alleyne as gravely as she could, "when dinner is at half-past seven, doesn't it?"

"You see," said Albert, "when he gave the order he was at his writing, m'm, and when he's at that he never wants to stop. But when he's once out he forgets his writing sometimes and wants to stop where he is. I'm sure he'll want to stop here, m'm," added Albert.

"Well, Albert," said the hostess, "the difficulty can best be solved I think by your staying here all the time. Johnson will give you some supper, and in return you can help Johnson, as the table-maid has just come and is inexperienced. Will that do, Johnson?"

"As you please, m'm," said Johnson dutifully.

"Though if there's one thing I can *not* stand," he added afterwards to old Margaret, "it's folk forcin' theirselves in like that upon me."

Before dinner was over, however, he had changed his opinion of Albert. The young man was so deferential, so anxious to learn from him. Yet he waited with a dexterity which Jane the new table-maid could never hope to reach, though she, like a sensible girl, never took her eyes off him. It was a pleasure to see him handing round the plates. Only once he made a little slip and that was when he looked up for the first time and caught the eye of Captain Piffard fixed upon him with a puzzled expression.

"Now where have I seen that man?" the captain was saying to himself, when there was a loud ejaculation from Mr. Tosh who was sitting opposite to him.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, turning upon the unfortunate Albert. "Take care what you are doing. Don't you see that you nearly knocked over my wine-glass?"

"I'm very sorry, sir," said Albert meekly.

"And so you may well be," retorted his master, "making an exhibition of yourself and me, as though you had never been accustomed to wait upon decent people!"

The little old man for the moment was a-glare with anger; his face with its bristling white eyebrows and its crown of rather long white hair resembled a large red gooseberry embedded in a very high stiff collar.

His misfortune, however, served to ingratiate Albert more than anything else could have done with the sympathetic Johnson, and to distract the attention of Piffard from him by making that gentleman devote himself thenceforth to the restoration of harmony.

Later, however, when they had sat down to bridge and the two men came in with coffee, the likeness of Albert to some one he had seen struck him again and more forcibly than before.

"Lord!" he said to himself. "If it's not that chap at Greywoods that went off with the diamond star it certainly is most uncommonly like him. But it can't be surely, after five, six, no—seven years. If it is, he must have played his cards well. Anyhow, I'm not going to make an ass of myself over him a second time."

He was careful after that never so much as to glance in Albert's direction. He was rather absent, however, till he made a misdeal and Mr. Tosh sharply called him to order.

He would have been more absent still could he have seen through three stone walls into a remote pantry where Albert had retired on some excuse or other to snatch a moment's

conversation with Jane, the inexperienced table-maid. She was not so new to him as to the household it seemed.

"Well, old boy," she said in a low tone as she lit a taper to see him by, lighting up at the same time her own pert little face. "What's to be done now? Here I am standing to, and ready to take your orders, sir."

"You're a smart little devil, Jane," he said, looking admiringly at her out of his heavy-lidded half-closed eyes, "and the costume suits you. But it's all no go, my girl."

"No go?" she said surprised.

"At least I am afraid not unless something special turns up."

"Something special?" she said. "What do you want more than those emeralds you saw to-night, eh? I shouldn't have thought you could find anything better than that necklet. It was special enough for me, anyhow."

"Well, get it then," said Albert.

"*Me?* I couldn't," said Jane. "There's a dragon of an old woman called Margaret in charge of them who ought to have been made a special constable."

"Well, my dear, let me tell you there's more of her sort about. Did you see that man in uniform that was at dinner?"

"You don't suppose I'm blind, do you?" said Jane.

"I wish *he* was blind," said Albert vindictively. "He's Piffard, the gentleman detective."

"What?" exclaimed Jane. "The man who was staying at Greywoods five—six—seven years ago?"

Albert nodded.

Jane was silent for a moment. Then she tossed her dainty cap-strings.

"What does it matter?" she said. "You scored off him that time."

"It was a rare bit of luck though," said Albert, "very rare. However, one never knows when another chance of the same sort may turn up."

"Well, if it does I'm all there, you know," said Jane. "Now clear out or old father Johnson will suspect that you are flirting with his nice new table-maid."

"Well, so I am," said Albert, "and I am not going now without one kiss at least."

"Oh, rot!" said Jane. "I never was one of the kissing kind."

"Well, I am," said Albert. "Put that taper down. It's in my way."

"I won't," said Jane, "and if you come an inch nearer I'll singe you with it."

"No need to do that, my girl," said Albert. "The Germans will be doing that soon enough for you."

The taper wavered.

"Albert," exclaimed Jane, "you're never thinking of going soldiering, are you?"

"Didn't you see the evening papers?" he said. "I'll jolly well have to go soon now whatever I think."

"Well, then," said Jane, "there's one thing certain, Albert. I must be out of this first. I'm not going to be left here servanting."

"Nothing easier, my dear," said Albert. "All you have to do is just to tell your mistress that you've been sent for suddenly to go to a hospital somewhere about Land's End to take the place of a V.A.D. cousin who has been ordered to Salonika. She is the kind that will give you a send-off the same night with wages paid, railway ticket, and everything."

"Albert, you really are so clever," said Jane, "that, as you are going soldiering, you may have just one— Oh, goodness me—take care!" she added.

"No, I won't!" said Albert recklessly.

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"What's that smell of burning?" said Johnson sniffing, as five minutes later his guest joined him at his private supper-table.

"Is there a smell of burning?" said Albert.

"Bless me, don't you smell it?" said Johnson. "And there's a hole in the lapel of your coat that would let a penny through!"

"So there is," said Albert examining it. "It must have been the taper that did it."

"The taper?" exclaimed Johnson. "What sort of a taper?"

"Oh, just an ordinary one I—came in contact with," said Albert.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

IN WHICH BRITAIN GAINS A NEW RECRUIT AND
GERMANY LOSES ONE

IN the drawing-room bridge was in full swing and the irascible Mr. Tosh was in high good humour.

"He'll never learn to play properly, you know," Fred said afterwards, "because he has such ridiculous luck, and partners like you, Lottie, who can't be nasty to him."

Certain it was that in spite of his going five in hearts without the slightest justification he and his partner seemed to be carrying all before them, when a long-drawn thin sound shrilled suddenly into the pleasant silence.

"The telephone," said Mrs. Alleyne, clutching her cards together apprehensively.

"Your lead, partner," said Mr. Tosh.

But Johnson was already in the doorway.

"Mrs. Baxter to speak to you, m'm," he announced.

"She should have been called Bother instead of Baxter, Cecilia should," said Mrs. Baxter's irate brother as the hostess fled, and his two opponents had only partially succeeded in pacifying him when she returned to infuriate him more than ever.

"I am sorry," she said breathlessly, "but I must go to the canteen. Mrs. Baxter has been telephoning. Mrs. Coulter has taken ill, and the caretaker has had to go home with her, leaving only Mrs. Wilkinson and Mrs. Baxter, and they—they are not getting on. I must go at once. Will you just play three-handed?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Alleyne," said Mr. Tosh rising, "since my sister, not content with turning me out of the house for dinner, is now, it seems, turning me back into it

again. Well, thank heaven, I have my work. Will somebody tell Albert?"

Albert did not need to be told. He was in the hall with his master's coat over his arm, and the sight of him there, so reliable and capable-looking, suggested a new idea to the harassed hostess. Pausing in her flight up the stairs she hurried down again and back into the drawing-room.

"Mr. Tosh," she said, meeting that gentleman on his way to the door, "will you lend me Albert for an hour at the canteen?"

"My dear Mrs. Alleyne——" began Mr. Tosh, but Fred immediately chimed in.

"The very thing, Aunt Lottie," he said. "We'll have a smoke now, and Piffard will tell us one of his tales, and then we'll finish the bridge when you come back, or if you prefer it, sir, Piffard and I will see you home. We would be no good anyhow at the canteen."

"Why Cecilia should require so much assistance I cannot understand," grumbled the old man. "And to hear her talk one would think she did everything in this town single-handed. Well if I must—I must, I suppose. Tell Albert he may go for an hour. But not one moment longer. Remember, not one moment longer."

At the end of the allotted time, however, Mr. Tosh had quite forgotten his own injunction. He was seated before the fire between the two young men absorbed in one of Piffard's narratives.

When the hour was actually announced by the little Boule clock on the mantelpiece Piffard paused for a moment.

"Go on, sir," said Mr. Tosh impatiently. "So the hostess came to you, did she? And you suspected one of the guests?"

"I suspected the servant of one of them," said Piffard.

"Well, and what did you do then?"

"Ah, that was the disappointment, I could do nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing at all," said Piffard. "You see, the thing was

lost during an interview the lady of the house—who was a young and very charming woman—had with one of the guests in the library late one night. He was a young fool with no real harm in him, but he was madly in love with her at the time and she had a very jealous old husband who, if he had heard what had happened, might have ruined the boy for life. There was a big screen in the library and she was afraid that her lover's servant, who was the man I suspected as the thief, had been hidden behind there all the time. But we had no real proof. All that I had to go upon was that I myself had met the man coming out of the library after our hostess and her admirer had gone. Even if I could have caught him with this, however, which was doubtful, the lady would not even let me try to catch the thief when she heard who I suspected, in case he in his turn might denounce her to her husband and tell of the scene she had had with his master. The rascal had counted on this, I believe. Though he knew I suspected him, I think, he was as cool as a cucumber."

"And went off with the diamond star," exclaimed Mr. Tosh. "What fools women are!"

"Or what unselfish angels!" said Fred.

"Bah!" said Mr. Tosh. "I don't call her unselfish. Probably she hushed it up as much for her own sake as anybody's. Besides she very likely led the fellow on—I know 'em. But in any case she let loose a criminal upon the world. That's what she did. And you connived at it, sir," he added, turning suddenly upon Piffard. "I'm surprised at you—calling yourself a detective too—very surprised."

"You are not half so surprised, sir," said Piffard, with some heat, "as that thief will be when I catch him, as I have every intention of doing, every hope of doing."

"Aha!" exclaimed Mr. Tosh. "You have your eye on him then? You are on his track?"

"Yes, I am," said Piffard, "but it's a watching game. I cannot lay my hands on him till he does something else. And to-morrow or the next day I may be ordered off to

France or Egypt or Mesopotamia. The war plays the very deuce with my work."

"By Jove, sir!" exclaimed the old man, slapping his hands on the arms of his chair, "rather than let the fellow escape I myself would track him down for you."

"Or I," laughed Fred. "It would be the beginning of our partnership, Piffard."

As he spoke the telephone bell rang again.

"Mrs. Alleyne wishing to speak to Mr. Lorimer," said Johnson entering.

Fred sprang up and went out.

His aunt's voice sounded agitated.

"Are you there, Fred?"

"Yes."

"I have sent Albert back to take Mr. Tosh home."

"Yes."

"And whenever he is gone I want you to come down here."

"What? Hasn't Albert washed up the cups properly?"

"Yes, yes," said his aunt breathlessly, "but I want you here and Captain Piffard too if he can come."

Here he was rung off abruptly, and turning he became aware of Albert standing in the hall behind him. At the same moment the drawing-room door opened and Mr. Tosh came out.

"That man of mine is late as usual," he was saying when he saw Albert. Then—

"What the devil do you mean," he exclaimed, "by not letting me know that you were there, sir?"

"If I were Albert I should murder Mr. Tosh," said Fred as he and Captain Piffard groped their way together along the darkened streets.

"No you wouldn't," said Piffard. "Not if you were Albert."

"Perhaps not," said Fred. "He has the patience of Job."

"And twenty times his cleverness," said Piffard.

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Mrs. Alleyne met them in the passage at the canteen very businesslike in a blue linen overall. She had a scared look in her eyes nevertheless.

"My dears," she said as soon as she saw them, "an awful thing has happened. I've lost two rings out of that emerald set."

"What?" said Piffard sharply.

"I've lost two rings," she repeated, "out of that set of emeralds—your set, Fred, and I'm at my wits' end to know what to do about it."

Her lip quivered.

"But they can't be really lost," said Fred.

"How did you lose them?" said Piffard. "Sit down here, Mrs. Alleyne, and tell us everything first. You had them on when you came here then?"

As he spoke he ushered her into the dining-room, a large place where the air was heavy with the odour of teas and suppers. All the food, however, had been cleared away from the long counter at the further end, and only one feeble gas jet was burning.

They sat down at one of the deserted tables.

"Yes, unluckily I had them on," said Mrs. Alleyne. "I was in such a hurry, you see, that I did not notice them till I was here. Then—for I hate buttering scones with stones on—I took them off at once and put them into a cup on that table at the back of the counter there."

"Just an open cup?" said Piffard.

"No, I put a saucer over it."

"And at the end of the time you found that the cup and saucer were gone?"

"No, only the rings, that's the strange thing," said Mrs. Alleyne.

"Then some one must have taken them purposely and put back the saucer again," said Fred, "some one thinking they were not safe there, perhaps—Mrs. Wilkinson or Mrs. Baxter. But of course you asked them first thing."

"No, Fred, I did not," was the unexpected answer.

"Aunt Lottie! Why not?"

"I dared not," said Mrs. Alleyne.

"Dared not?"

"No. You see they were at daggers drawn. They had had a regular battle before I came in about some trifle that no one would think of quarrelling over, and it had left them both in a state of mind in which they were capable of believing anything about each other, and I must say," added Mrs. Alleyne "—and that is what makes me so scared—I can't help thinking myself that one of them must have taken the rings."

"Aunt Lottie!" exclaimed Fred. "Mrs. Wilkinson and Mrs. Baxter!"

"Well, who else could? Not a soul was behind the counter all the time except myself and these two women."

"Are you sure quite of that?" said Piffard. "Could none of the men who came to the counter have taken them?"

"Not one. You see the cup was behind where we were standing serving. We were between it and the counter. Even if we had not been there is a wide space between it and the table where the cup was standing."

"Where's the pantry?" said Piffard, looking round him.

"There," said Mrs. Alleyne, pointing to a door opening into darkness straight from the space behind the counter.

"Oh, yes," said Captain Piffard.

"Albert was in there, of course," said Mrs. Alleyne, divining his thought, "washing dishes and making tea, but he never came in here once."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Had you a lot of men in this evening?"

"Crowds," said Mrs. Alleyne.

"Oh, yes," said Piffard again. "Well, you must be tired. You should come home now."

"Yes, Aunt Lottie," added Fred. "The rings will turn up all right. My theory is that one of your two ladies has put them in a safer place and has forgotten to tell you about

them. You will be getting them back to-morrow morning from either Mrs. Wilkinson or Mrs. Baxter."

"I do hope you are right, Fred," said Mrs. Alleyne doubtfully, "but don't you think to make quite sure we might make a search first? I might go through the cupboards while you and Captain Piffard do the floor thoroughly."

Fred looked with distaste at a fragment of scone smeared with jam which was lying near where he was standing.

"Do you want us to go down on our knees to it, Aunt Lottie?" he said.

"There is absolutely no need to look further here, Mrs. Alleyne," said Captain Piffard with conviction. "The rings are not here I am certain. Doubtless Lorimer is quite right. You will be hearing about them to-morrow morning."

"You think that really?" said Mrs. Alleyne eagerly. "I am so glad. It gives one confidence. I have had a bad hour and a half I can tell you."

"Do you mean to say you missed them so long ago as that?" exclaimed Piffard.

"Oh, no, I only missed them a little ago, but there was the quarrel first. They were not on speaking terms by the time I got here, but they said things *at* each other. I was quite ashamed before Albert."

"Albert should be used to having things said at *him*, anyhow," laughed Fred as he helped her to put on her coat.

"What I should have done without Albert I don't know," said Mrs. Alleyne, "for the caretaker was a long time in coming back, and neither of those women would wash up, because that is what they had been quarrelling about. The dirty dishes would have been piled sky-high—but Albert is a most capable man."

"He is, indeed," said Captain Piffard. "Most capable."

"I'll give them till to-night," Mrs. Alleyne said, when next morning no message came to The Gables about the rings.

Then when night came—

"I'll give them till to-morrow night," she said.

But to-morrow night came and there was still no message.

Captain Piffard came in after dinner to hear the news.

"Oh, I am glad to see you," said Mrs. Alleyne. "Do sit down. I am more than ever at my wits' end. No message has come about the rings. Isn't it awful to think that a rich woman of good standing—for they are both that—could stoop to do such a thing?"

"Yes, if one has to think it," said Piffard, seating himself on the chair indicated and selecting a cigarette. "But for my part I don't think it."

"You *don't* think it?" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne. "But I thought you did?"

"You were mistaken," said Piffard. "I never thought it."

"But you believe they were stolen, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, now that they have not been returned. The replacing of the saucer on the empty cup proves that."

"But then—who—who——"

"My dear Mrs. Alleyne," said Piffard leaning forward and speaking in a low voice. "I have almost no doubt at all that it was Albert who stole those rings at the canteen."

"Albert!" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne, remembering Albert as he had appeared there at work in his shirt-sleeves, absorbed, dignified, with a towel flung over his shoulder.

"Albert!" she said again. "Oh, that's not possible!"

"Excuse me," said Piffard. "But I know him better than you do. Do you remember that last story I told you, Lorrimer, that night old Tosh was here?"

"Rather," said Fred. "You don't mean to say that——"

"It's the same man—yes," said Piffard. "I thought that night at dinner that I recognised him. He has shaved off a moustache he had then and is much better-looking, but even if he had worn a mask I would have made sure it was he by his manner of working."

"Of working?"

"Of stealing I mean. He's a student of character this man. He is not only wonderfully quick and deft with his hands, but he has the mental capacity to seize moral opportunities—immoral I should say, for the people he robs are always in some awkward little predicament. Last time," he went on turning to his hostess, "it was a married woman who wanted to shield a foolish young lover of hers that he robbed of a diamond pendant. Now he robs you—seeing you to be in a difficult position between two women who dislike each other so much that they will be capable even of suspecting each other."

"The wretch!" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne. "But he is wrong this time. Neither of those two women would believe that the other did such a thing."

"My dear aunt," said Fred laughing, "you yourself have just been believing it."

"So I have!" she remembered in dismay. "You see," she explained, "I am so certain that Albert never was outside the pantry that night."

"Ah, but that's just where his special capability comes in," said Piffard. "I tell you his talent is quite wasted in ordinary thieving. He ought to have made his fortune as a conjuror."

"You mean you think he could have come behind the counter without any of us three women knowing it?"

"Certainly," said Piffard. "It would be child's play to him. You had crowds of men you told me in the canteen that night. I can see quite well how it would be. He would watch his moment when you were all at the other end of the room, one of you downstairs in the kitchen, perhaps, the others with their backs turned. It would be all over in a minute. He would be back at his dishes with the rings in his waistcoat-pocket before any one knew he had left his post."

"The fiend!" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne. "Well, thank goodness you are here, Captain Piffard. Now we shall be able to catch him."

"Shall we though?" said Piffard watching her. "How about Mrs. Wilkinson and Mrs. Baxter?"

"Why? What have they to do with it now?"

"This much," said Piffard, "that if we arrest him on suspicion he will of course accuse them."

"Oh, heavens, I had not thought of that!" cried Mrs. Alleyne. "Now stop laughing, Fred. This is no laughing matter."

"I can't help it," said Fred, rocking in his chair, "when I think of the faces of Mrs. Wilkinson and Mrs. Baxter as they will appear in the dock together—still not on speaking terms."

"Oh, don't," groaned Mrs. Alleyne. "Well, it's a good thing after all that you take it so lightly, Fred, since the rings are yours and not mine after all, for of course now I must give up all hope of recovering them. Even a breath of this would utterly ruin the canteen and of course just now that must come before everything."

"Even my professional reputation I suppose," grumbled Piffard, "and I must let my man go scot-free for the second time."

"Hard lines," said Fred. "Do you really think, Aunt Lottie, that it would make any difference to the canteen? Surely they would have the sense——"

"No, I can't risk it," said Mrs. Alleyne firmly. "You have no idea, Fred, what some of these people are. Think of it—both these women accused and each suspecting the other and saying so. No. I'm sorry, but I really can't risk it. I would rather replace the rings myself if I have any money left when the war is over and the canteen closed for ever."

"That settles it then," said Piffard. "Albert once more has won the trick it seems. But he can't get such chances every time and he will be so conceited after this that he is bound to make some bad blunder."

"Ah, and then you will catch him," said Mrs. Alleyne. "And if there is anything I can do to make up——"

Here the door opened and Johnson appeared with a note.

"From Mrs. Baxter, m'm," he said advancing.

The three in council round the fire looked up with interest.

Mrs. Alleyne took the note and felt it over eagerly.

"I thought they might be in it," she said with a sigh, as she tore open the envelope.

Then after she had read the contents in silence—

"Listen to this," she said without further comment.

"DEAR MRS. ALLEYNE,—I hear you are in need of some one to go to the canteen to-morrow and write at once to let you know that I am quite free to go at any time. A wealthy old lady who is, I am told, of good family and has a small property, has been inspired—for I can call it nothing else—to offer house-room and the use of her servants to a limited number of people—all paying their own expenses of course—who like herself are wealthy and without encumbrances. These she calls Wrack-straws. They are totally useless persons and, indeed, are hindering by their presence the public usefulness of others. You will not be surprised to hear that I at once applied to her on behalf of my brother Alexander, with the happy result that he and his man left for Bartonsmuir this afternoon. (Bartonsmuir is the name of the place.)

"It is now my intention to go into rooms, close the house here, and dismiss the servants, so that I shall henceforth be able to devote myself entirely to assisting you.—With kind regards, yours very sincerely, CECILIA BAXTER."

"I had not included men in my estimate of course," said Miss Caroline on the morning of the day which was to witness the arrival of Mr. Tosh and Albert. "But in these times we must adapt ourselves to circumstances. Kindly go, Miss Charteris, and tell Mrs. McMurtrie that she must come up to the house this afternoon to reside during the period of the war."

"Caroline!" exclaimed Miss Emily. "Do you think this is wise? Mrs. McMurtrie——"

"Must adapt herself like the rest of us," said Miss

Caroline firmly. "According to his sister, Mr. Tosh suffers from a very violent temper. It will prevent dispeace if we give him and his man the East Lodge."

"Except the dispeace with Mrs. McMurtrie when she is asked to give the East Lodge up," said Miss Emily.

"Oh, I'll manage it," said Ann confidently.

She found it more difficult, however, than she had imagined it would be. Mrs. McMurtrie at first could not or would not comprehend what was required of her, and then when she did understand she was very wroth. At last, however, by dint of flattery and persuasion mingled with veiled threats Ann succeeded in transferring not only her but her large cat, called Walter after the absent McMurtrie, to their new quarters. They were just in time to see from their window the approach of the car bringing Mr. Tosh and his attendant.

"What a funny little red-faced man!" said Ann, who was watching the arrival from another window. "He's like a golliwog with white hair."

"Hush, Miss Charteris dear!" said Miss Emily who was peering over her shoulder.

"It's all right, Miss Emily," Ann replied. "He's too absorbed in Miss Caroline to hear any one but her at the present moment."

"And no wonder," said Miss Emily proudly. "I only wish we all had Caroline's manner."

Ann dutifully acquiesced, smiling a little nevertheless at the thought of herself sailing about with her hands clasped in front of her as Miss Caroline did.

"The servant is quite a handsome man, don't you think?" was Miss Emily's next remark. "Oh, dear, dear, his master is scolding him for something, and apologising to Caroline at the same time for doing it. It's for taking the portmanteau out of the motor—when he did it all for the best too! Poor fellow, poor fellow! How very patient he is with Mr. Tosh!"

Thus on the very doorstep of Bartonsmuir Albert won

golden opinions. Arbuthnot who was present also as guard of honour to Miss Caroline heartily endorsed Miss Emily's praise. When he came in at lunch-time therefore with his master he was warmly welcomed in the servants' hall, and by the time the meal was over he was the admired of all the company assembled there.

The household above stairs, however, with the exception of Ann, did not see him again until prayers, when he appeared at the end of the procession of elderly women-servants along with Japp the odd-man.

Ann, who had been dispatched to the East Lodge during the afternoon to see if all was right there, had found him busy in his shirt-sleeves with Walter the cat, looking as though he had not been transferred at all, established on the table lazily watching his operations.

"He was here when we arrived, miss," said Albert when Ann exclaimed in surprise at the return of the exile, "and the master's quite delighted with him, which is a mercy."

It was. For no flattery or persuasion would induce the heartless Walter to share poor Mrs. McMurtrie's banishment. He deigned to visit her occasionally. He allowed her at times to shed tears over him. He ate the tit-bits she spread before him to lure him to the Big House. But hardly were they swallowed when he would go back to the East Lodge and resume his place on its new tenant's writing-table. He liked the feeling of the papers apparently, for from among them it was impossible to dislodge him. And while the manuscripts he lay on were continually being corrected till some of the sheets were mere confusions of insertions and erasures complicated with blots and muddled references to other pages, Walter in their midst remained unaltered and unalterable.

As Albert spoke he went on unpacking his master's writing materials. He had previously packed away—he told Ann—Mrs. McMurtrie's ornaments and other breakables.

"When Mr. Tosh is in one of his tantrums you see, miss," he explained, "you never know what he might be doing."

"Does he often have them?" said Ann anxiously.

"Yes, miss, at Rathness he had," said Albert. "You see a literary gentleman like him is easily upset. He's got too many ideas, you see, miss. That's what's the matter with him. You would think that was a good thing, but it's the very worst for a gentleman that is wanting to write a plain book. He gets—say—a chapter done. Well and good. But then somebody comes in and gives him a new idea that won't fit in, or that upsets all the old ones. That's very worrying, miss. Then this war. You see the book was about why it was impossible that Germany should go to war with Britain. Well—then the war began. That was very worrying again, miss. All the book has had to be altered now. No wonder he is a little hasty sometimes."

"I do like Albert," Ann reported to Miss Emily. "He is so interested in his master and so sympathetic. He has made the front room at the East Lodge already into the neatest little study, with the old box-bed for a book-case and a bowl of crocuses on the writing-table. You have no idea how nice it is."

Mr. Tosh meanwhile, in baggy tweeds and with a large fawn-coloured wide-awake clapped on the back of his head, was wandering about the grounds in the spring sunshine, forgetting his worries in the congenial society of Miss Caroline.

"Yes, Miss Barton," he said as they paused to look at the hepaticas, "I have a presentiment that I shall finish my book here as Johnson might have finished his *Rasselas* at the country-house of Mrs. Thrale."

"Sir, you delight me," said Miss Caroline beaming. "Little did I dream that the East Lodge was to harbour such a guest."

"If I might read portions of it to you occasionally it would be an inspiration to me," continued Mr. Tosh.

"Nothing would please me better," exclaimed Miss Caroline quite charmed.

Thus by prayer-time the first Wrack-straw and his servant were on the best of terms with the household. At this function Albert sat with folded arms and the utmost decorum between the stately Arbuthnot and Japp, making the latter seem more ill-grown and furtive and futile and miserable than he had ever before appeared. His master sat at the other end of the room, stiffly erect, his hands resting on the arms of his chair, his lips pursed, his ruddy cheeks slightly distended, his head a little on one side, like an attentive robin redbreast. . . .

It was the next day at breakfast that the telegram came announcing the arrival of Mrs. Bellairs and her two friends.

Sanders the table-maid brought the news down to the servants' hall where the two house-maids, Watson and Williams, still sat talking to Albert.

"So," said Sanders, "one o' you must come and help me with the silver, seein' that I've been helpin' you all week with the rooms. Last night at dinner I was black affrontit of it, and once all these folks come there'll be less time than ever to thorough-clean it."

Neither Watson nor Williams, however, seemed to be enthusiastic.

"I've still plenty to do myself," said Williams.

"Can I not help?" suggested Albert. "I'm used to silver, and Mr. Tosh told me that if I dared to enter the Lodge again before a quarter to one he would throw the ink at me."

"My, but I'll be glad if you will, Mr. Figgis," said Sanders amid the general laughter, and without more ado the two went off together and were soon hard at work in the silver-pantry.

It was a lightsome pleasant place with cupboards all down one side and a large safe on the other where special heirlooms were kept. A long table was there too and com-

fortable chairs so that the labour of the cleaning process was reduced to a pastime.

"And never have I seen in all the years I have been among silver a better cleaner than Mr. Figgis," Sanders reported afterwards. "He did the things in half the time I take, and gave me, that thought I knew all there was to know, some real fine notions."

Quite an array of forks and spoons and other minor accessories was already gleaming at one end of the long table when the front-door bell rang sharply, and then after an interval more urgently.

"Watson will be up in the attics," said Sanders, "but Williams must be hearin' it."

Sanders, however, was either wrong about Williams hearing it or in her inference that she would consider it her duty to attend to it, for a third time the bell rang, and this time in a prolonged and determined manner.

"You'll have to go, Miss Sanders," said Albert, polishing away at an enormous soup-ladle.

Sanders banged down the tea-pot she was working at, wiped her hands hastily, set her cap straight in front of a dish-cover instead of a mirror, and then, tying on another apron as she went, she departed in high dudgeon.

Hardly had the door closed behind her when Albert turned in his chair.

The big safe was just behind him. In a moment he had whipped a bunch of skeleton keys out of his pocket and was trying them one after the other in the lock of it. He had already tried two and was adjusting the third when a slight noise just outside the window attracted his attention. Turning again hastily he saw to his dismay a pasty face just outside the bars there. It was Japp with a can of water and soap, a large mop, and an inscrutable expression, engaged apparently on window-cleaning operations. He must have just arrived, but it was impossible to tell from his stolid countenance what he had seen or not seen in that fraction of time. His shabby cloth cap was pulled

well down over his eyes and a mask of stupidity was over his face. Something indefinable about him, however, convinced the astute Albert that it was only a mask. That student of character was profoundly disconcerted. To add to his confusion the key stuck in the lock. There was nothing for it but to wrestle with it until it came out feeling all the while the eyes of Japp upon him. He just missed having to do it under the eyes of Sanders as well. He had only resumed the soup-ladle one instant before she reappeared and his equanimity was by no means restored by Japp's elaborate unawareness of his presence. After he had nodded to him twice in a friendly manner without receiving the slightest response, he was constrained to conclude either that Japp was short-sighted or that he meant to cut him dead. Since the cleaning of the windows had been entrusted to him Albert was forced to the latter explanation of his behaviour—unless he was only absorbed in his work or indifferent or thoroughly stupid.

The uncertainty was very harrowing and the situation was not rendered less uncomfortable by the return of Sanders. When she resumed her seat with her back to the window Albert for one moment thought of changing places with her, but remembered just in time that Japp might then, if so inclined, make signs behind his back to Sanders. Clearly the only thing to be done was to carry off the situation and deal with the Japp complication afterwards. Sanders benefited by this resolution to the extent of a most entertaining half-hour until with the departure of Japp Mr. Figgis subsided into a normal cheerfulness.

At a quarter to one, when he was repairing to the East Lodge, Albert saw Japp making for his abode at the West one. He was shambling along still carrying his pail and mop, and if he *did* see Mr. Figgis on the other side of the lawn he again took no notice of him. As Albert went on his way he cursed his luck. He was caught in his own toils. He had been surprised.

"Whoever could have dreamed," he said to himself,

"that that little idiot would appear just there of all places!"

It made him furious to think what an insignificant creature Japp was and how feeble was the hand into which he was delivered. He mused about it all day. After luncheon he returned to his room at the lodge. It was the third and smallest room in the little house with a window looking out on Mrs. McMurtrie's cabbages. But ponder as he might he could think of no plan either to find out whether Japp had realised what he was doing at the safe, or to prevent him informing upon him if he wanted to.

Mr. Tosh in the throes of composition next door did not ring for him till five o'clock. The early spring dusk was already beginning to fall and he was making tea for his master on Mrs. Murtrie's fire when the closed motor with Japp driving and piled high with luggage passed the lodge on its way to the Big House.

The two Miss Bartons, attended by Ann, Arbuthnot, and the housemaids, were all waiting in the hall. As the motor came to a standstill before the steps, Miss Caroline with Miss Emily and Ann came out on to the threshold.

A hearty laugh heralded the appearance of Mrs. Bellairs, a very stout but still very handsome woman in her seventies.

"My dears," she said, unwinding herself from a motor-veil, "here we are after the most amusing journey I have ever experienced. I have not enjoyed myself so much since I was seventeen. Most of our luggage is lost, I believe, but there is still some left. I am afraid your man will have to go back for it as we could not get it all on to the motor this time. Now, Sophy," she went on, turning to the motor again, "come along. All our trials and troubles are ended."

As she spoke she handed out a pale, grim woman whose wrinkles and general attenuation contrasted strangely with the richness and amplitude of her clothes. On her head she wore a large and heavily trimmed hat, and the coiffure beneath it was of a dull golden colour.

"This," said Ann to herself, "must be the lady who looks only twenty from behind."

A moment later her surmise was confirmed.

"Mrs. Fennimore—Miss Barton, Miss Emily Barton," said Mrs. Bellairs.

"And this is our companion, Miss Charteris," returned Miss Emily.

"How are you, my dear?" said Mrs. Bellairs, abandoning an umbrella and a bag to Arbuthnot in order to shake hands with Ann. "Sophia, here is the companion—Miss Charteris—Mrs. Fennimore."

"Oh, indeed?" said Mrs. Fennimore, but she did not offer to shake hands.

Ann, however, was unaware of this, being engaged at the moment in helping Mrs. Pitmirran to alight. Japp had mutely requested her assistance, having found, when on the point of departing again, that his third passenger was still embedded in the motor. Mrs. Pitmirran was quite as stout if not stouter than Mrs. Bellairs, and was besides at the moment apparently in a despondent and immobile state of mind.

"I told Maud Bellairs," she said in a wheezy whispering voice, "that even if I did get in here I should never be able to get out again."

She was almost too much even for Ann, but presently she also stood on the threshold, looking in her magnificent sables like a large brown owl just scared out of some dark corner.

Watson and Williams were already carrying off the baggage.

"Now, Miss Charteris dear," said Miss Emily as soon as Mrs. Bellairs stopped talking for a moment, "will you give us all tea in the drawing-room? You will be glad of tea after your journey I am sure," she added to the company in general.

"I wish I was, I am sure," said Mrs. Pitmirran with a sigh. "But I have always very much disliked tea."

"Now, Bethia, you're not to be damping," said Mrs. Bellairs. "Remember the vow we made, we weren't to be damping. Miss Charteris dear, just give her some hot milk, and never ask her to take any special thing as it always makes her dislike whatever it is, to be invited to take it."

"How strange," she went on, as she led the way arm-in-arm with Miss Emily to the drawing-room, "to be in this dear old place once more. It brings back my twenties. Ah me! The dances I have danced here! Down the middle and up again!"

"You could dance still I believe, Maud," said Miss Emily smiling.

"This place makes me feel as if I could," said Mrs. Bellairs. "But no—I danced my last here—on the night twenty years ago, you remember, when Lottie was the belle and that fascinating young doctor from Lowhampton was so devoted to her."

"Was he?" said Miss Emily. "There were so many devoted to her I had forgotten, and so has he evidently, for he is engaged to our Miss Charteris now."

"What? To that child? But she must be half his age," cried Mrs. Bellairs.

"He was a great friend of her father's," explained Miss Emily.

"Indeed?" exclaimed Mrs. Bellairs. "How very interesting. I *do* enjoy a love affair! I must get her to tell me all about it."

Miss Emily laughed.

"The same old Maud, I see," she said. "I remember how all the girls used to confide in you."

"Ay, and the married women, too," laughed Mrs. Bellairs. "The sole justification for my existence during many years has been that I have been an excellent safety-valve—an admirable dumping-ground for confidences. This very Lottie of yours, for instance, would have run off from old Alleyne years ago if it had not been for me. Yes, you may look shocked if you like, Emily, but it's true. 'Swear at

him, my dear, to me, curse him,' I used to say, 'but don't leave him.' And she just managed to hold on and no more till he died. And now she thanks me for it and is a rich widow and can do what she likes and keep open house. A young nephew of mine is staying there just now. He is a nephew of old Alleyne's, too. Fred Lorimer, the V.C. You may have heard of him."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Emily. "Miss Charteris read about him I remember. There was quite a long paragraph. Is he a nephew of yours? I had no idea."

"He won't let Lottie tell any one about the V.C.," Mrs. Bellairs went on. "He hates the publicity of it. He says it makes him feel a fool, which is natural, perhaps, but rather annoying in a nephew. I wanted to fête him, of course, and show him off a bit about Netherton, but he would have none of me. Hence—here I am a Wrack-straw!"

"Upon which I congratulate myself," said Miss Emily. "You are just the very person, Maud, to help us to carry through this enterprise."

"No, no," returned Mrs. Bellairs. "The enterprise will go of itself. See—it is already going! Sophia Fennimore and Caroline have found some subject in common. Look at Sophia laying down the law as she always does when she is very happy, and look at Caroline's tassels wagging. Oh, I foresee that these two will be bosom friends! Then look at your Miss Charteris, the darling, seated prettily on the fender-stool and talking as sensibly as her own grandmother to poor old Bethia Pitmirran and making her forget to pretend that she doesn't like her hot milk!"

It was about an hour later that Albert, after escorting his master to the Big House, and divesting him of his overcoat and receiving his strict orders not to be a minute late for prayers, was at last free to do as he pleased.

He knew exactly what he wanted to do, and Mr. Tosh had hardly entered the drawing-room and been introduced to the three new Wrack-straws before Albert had arrived

at the end of the drive leading to the West Lodge. No sooner had he reached it, however, than shambling footsteps became audible behind him, and he had barely time to efface himself among the rhododendrons before Japp passed him on his way to his house. Immediately afterwards Albert wished he had stopped him. He was even about to call out, when some hesitation, which he later called providential, prevented him doing so until the door of the lodge had shut.

Then he heard the key turn noisily in the lock.

"So he locks himself in, does he?" said Albert to himself. "At seven in the evening."

The action struck him as strange. Was Japp expecting him then to visit him and taking this means of preventing him from coming in?

Well, then, he must do the unexpected and catch him when he had to come out before nine o'clock to go to prayers. Otherwise he might get no answer.

He settled himself, therefore, on the low wall in the shadow of the trees opposite to watch the house. For all he knew he might have to wait an hour or even more before Japp appeared. On the other hand, the little man might appear at any minute. There was nothing for it therefore but to stay on guard. With an inward groan he endeavoured to resign himself. His state of mind at the moment, however, made inactivity exceedingly difficult. As he sat there his anger against Japp rose till it was at fever-point, and his consciousness that it was quite unreasonable only made it burn more fiercely. Meanwhile, in miserable contrast to this inner fire his outer man was becoming chillier and chillier. An evening mist was rising from the shrubberies and the moss on the wall was already saturated. He discovered, too, after searching all his pockets, that he had with him neither his matches nor his cigarettes, and the fact of his having been so discomposed as to have forgotten them added the last touch to his discomfort.

Just at this moment, however, he noticed a ray of light faintly illuminating the greenery round the lower corner

of one of the lodge windows. The heavy dark blind must have been caught up a little, and by some chance remained unnoticed.

To Albert this neglected chink was a loop-hole of escape from boredom and melancholy broodings. His drooping spirits revived at the sight of it, and in less time than it takes to tell it he was entering Japp's garden gate.

He moved forward very quietly. It was almost dark now, but a pale radiance behind the tops of the trees showed where the moon was rising. All was silence save where here and there a drowsy bird fluttered in the rhododendrons. There was no breath of wind, no rustle among the leaves. Albert was glad that the little gate stood open. As it was it clicked when he let it go and the sound was like a pistol-shot in the silence. He stopped short in the pathway expecting some answering sign, but the lodge and its occupant remained absolutely quiet.

A moment after he was kneeling down on a comfortable clump of thyme and peering in at the little peep-hole. The room inside was full of firelight. Every corner was illuminated. But it was uninhabited. No Japp was there. Well, doubtless he would soon come back to it. Leaning his folded arms on the window-sill therefore Albert waited.

The blind was a thick one. The window was all dark except the one lighted corner. No one could see him from the road. Nor did the moonlight incommode him. It rather helped to conceal him by casting the shadow of the house upon him. Some sparrows among the ivy stirred at his presence and twittered for a little, but they became used to him after a time, for it was half-an-hour before his patience was rewarded.

He had been staring at the two white china dogs with black ears and tails that ornamented the huge dresser standing against the wall just facing him when to his utter astonishment he became aware that they, together with the whole dresser, were moving slowly towards him. Breathlessly he watched the dresser as it advanced smoothly and

noiselessly until it stood at right angles to the wall, leaving exposed a square hole in the flooring.

Next moment, however, he bit his lip to restrain himself from a yell of triumph, for, from the hole, first a lighted lamp held by a skinny hand, and then a skinny head with staring terror-stricken eyes, and thin hair matted with perspiration, had emerged before him.

"By *Georgel*!" he ejaculated.

Next moment he was at the door.

"I have him," he said to himself as he knocked loudly.

He was back at the window in time to see Japp, in a frenzied haste, which caused him to take several seconds longer than was necessary, push back the dresser into its place against the wall. Albert waited until he had quite finished this operation.

Then he returned to the door and knocked again more loudly.

"Who's there?" said Japp's voice, just inside, after a moment.

"Either a friend or an enemy," said Albert. "That depends."

"Whatever you are," returned Japp with spirit, "you needn't expect me to be a friend of yours. I know your voice. You are Mr. Tosh's man that was tryin' the safe with false keys this mornin'."

"Yes, you're very clever," said Albert, "but you're not clever enough, my boy. You leave peep-holes in your blinds that every passer-by can see through."

At this there was silence for a moment.

"What's that to you?" said Japp at last, but his voice had become a little uncertain.

"Nothing at all," said Albert, "but it may be something to you when I get down to the village in about half-an-hour and let 'em know at the police-office that I've discovered a hidden German dug-out."

The last words acted like an Open Sesame. Instantly the key grated in the lock. A moment after the door flew open.

"Be quiet!" said Japp hoarsely.

"All I want is to be quiet, you little fool," said Albert. "Let me in and I'll be quiet enough. How can we be quiet as you call it bawling through a door at each other?"

"You're quite right," said Japp, shivering as though with cold while he led the way into his kitchen. "At least you're quite right about the door—but you're wrong—quite wrong about the other. I—I tell you at once," he went on hurriedly, as Albert was about to interrupt him, "I am no German agent. I *hate* the Germans. My uncle was one and I always hated him. I hate him now though he is dead for getting me into the mess I'm in."

"He was a spy then?"

"One of the worst," said Japp, "though no one knew or guessed it here. He'd been a lot o' years at Bartonsmuir, and he'd made a queer use of his time, too, I tell you."

"He'd made a well-concealed trap-door anyhow," said Albert admiringly. "And what's below? A dug-out or a passage or what?"

"Both," said Japp miserably. "There's a room almost as big as this and a passage nearly a mile long leading from it under the moor to near the beach. It comes out at a place you'd never notice among the dunes. Oh, he was a hateful traitor!"

"Come, come!" said Albert. "You mustn't speak like that of your uncle. Besides you knew, too, didn't you?"

"Never till he was dying," said Japp. "He died just before the war and so he was obliged to tell me."

"Poor chap!" said Albert.

"Yes, it was a cruel thing to do," said Japp.

"I'm not pitying you, I'm pitying your uncle," said Albert. "He must have been sore put to it when he took *you* into his confidence. What has he down there?"

"Petrol, tins and tins," said Japp. "And there's bombs too."

Albert started.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"Bombs," repeated Japp. "Boxes and boxes of 'em."

"Good God!" said Albert. Then, "I don't believe it," he added.

"But it's true," persisted Japp. "'Explosives. To be handled with the Utmost Caution.' That's what's on the boxes."

"Well I'm damned!" said Albert.

"That's what I am," said Japp, "at least I'd just as soon be damned as live in the state I'm living in."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Albert.

"It's true," said the little man again. "Since there was word of the Zeppelins coming and dropping bombs about here, I can't stand the thought of the dug-out under me at nights. I've tried sleeping in the summer-house till I can hardly walk with rheumatism. So I was down below there just now to see if I could clear the things out. I wanted to take them down the passage under the moor and throw them into the sea——"

"But you couldn't, I suppose?" said Albert scornfully.

"No," said Japp, "I couldn't. I couldn't bring myself to it."

"You're a nice accomplice to have, you are," said Albert disgustedly. "Did your uncle die suddenly?"

"Yes, he fainted off one day and only came to again for a few minutes."

"I thought so," said Albert, "or he would have tried to get somebody else. But if you are so scared, man, why don't you clear out yourself?"

"I daren't," said Japp.

"Daren't?"

"No," replied Japp. "My uncle said that this was my post, and that there were Germans all about and that they would know if I left it. He said it would be known in Berlin, too, and that to desert would be as much as my life was worth."

"Nonsense," said Albert. "Your uncle wasn't up to date. There may be Germans about, but they're not so free as they

were a month ago even, and Berlin is a long way off. I'll bet you a pound that if you left here to-morrow and went and enlisted you would be perfectly safe. And more than likely you'd never be sent to the front. They want brains and muscles there, you know."

"Then you think that Berlin——"

"Berlin be blowed," said Albert. "We'll be in it before they know you have left Bartonsmuir. What's more they can't have known that you were here in charge of your uncle's job, for if they had they would have bombed you off long ago. That's the kind of people they are."

"What scares me most," said Japp, becoming garrulous in the relief of at last being able to unburden his mind to some one, "what scares me more than anything is the thought of what might happen if a bomb from a Zeppelin reached the dug-out. I might escape myself, but there would be a flare-up like the Last Day and Miss Caroline ever after would think I was for the Germans."

"My dear chap," said Albert, "make a bargain with me then. Clear out to-morrow and I'll clear the bombs out."

"Will you?" said Japp awe-struck.

"Of course I will," said Albert.

"You seem pretty cool about it," said Japp, with sudden suspicion. "Are you, perhaps, for the Germans yourself?"

"The Lord forbid!" said Albert. "Catch me taking such a risk as to back any nationality. No, no, my lad. For me there exist only two peoples in the world—the Rich and the Not Rich."

"Oh, yes—I forgot—you're a burglar," said Japp with a recurrence of contempt.

"I beg your pardon," said Albert. "I am nothing of the kind. A burglar takes whatever he can get. I appropriate only superfluous wealth. I am what is called a Honeycomber."

"I see," said Japp, blinking at him doubtfully.

Then he started back as Albert advanced suddenly upon him.

"And I mind my own business," he hissed into his face. "Mind yours, my chicken, or it may be the worse for you."

"I will—I will," said Japp hastily.

"Clear out then," said Albert. "After prayers to-night tell 'em you feel you *ought* to go. No more will be needed here."

"But—but the work," said Japp bewildered.

"Oh, I'll arrange that," said Albert. "Leave it to me and your motor and your mop and whatever you need for your work. I'll do it three times over, and my own too, without knowing any difference."

He stood tapping his foot on the ground impatiently while Japp shifted and sweated in an agony of indecision.

"Will you swear you'll clear out the bombs?" he said at last.

"As soon as I come back from seeing you off at the station to-morrow morning I'll get started to them," said Albert.

After that, as Japp said to his conscience afterwards when it accused him of leaving such a man in his place, what else was there left for him to do? Any one in such a position would have done the same. On the one hand, all he could see was Albert denouncing him at the police-office; on the other was Albert releasing him from an anxiety and a responsibility which had become intolerable. Besides, as he reminded it further, from the time of this interview onwards he was not himself. He was in a dazed state. So much so, that it was only afterwards he realised that he had gone up the drive on the way to prayers actually arm-in-arm with Albert. He had not, in fact, known rightly what he was doing until he was in the train next day many miles from Bartonsmuir.

But all these excuses, though he repeated them a dozen times, availed him little with that conscience of his. Not for nothing had he, every Sunday of his boyhood, been taught about heaven and hell by Miss Caroline. Not for nothing had he heard her read the Bible and say her prayers

at nine o'clock every evening for years. Gradually, under his flabby exterior, a tough and stern mentor had come into being who would now tolerate no evasions or prevarications and ordered him, at all costs, to denounce Albert the Honeycomber.

This, however, he could not bring himself to do any more than he had been able to bring himself to handle the explosives.

So with Albert on the one side and Miss Caroline on the other, Japp, though physically safe enough, was mentally in a state of torment. His one comfort was Ann's cleverness. He remembered how she had discovered him in the summer-house.

"Whoever he gets to the north of," he kept saying to himself, "he never will get to the north of Miss Charteris."

And Albert did not, though for quite another reason than any imagined by his remorseful accomplice.

The day after Japp's departure Mr. Tosh was in a furious temper because a sheet of paper had been mislaid upon which the clean copy of a paragraph had been written. In this evil hour a letter from the recruiting-officer arrived ordering Albert Figgis to report himself at once at Southampton.

"You could claim temporary exemption for me if you liked, sir," said Albert tentatively.

"On what grounds?" snapped Mr. Tosh.

"I am the only man-servant about the house, sir," said Albert. "To-day I have been motor-man, gardener, and footman besides valeting you, sir."

"And throwing my manuscripts about like waste-paper," said Mr Tosh losing his temper again, if indeed he had ever found it since the incident of the missing paragraph. "No, you are of no use whatever to *me*."

"In that case, sir," said Albert, repressing a violent desire to seize his master by his long white hair and shake him, "I shall start by the first train to-morrow morning if that suits you."

"Anything will suit me," said Mr. Tosh, "that will rid me of any one so inept as you are."

His temper had changed, however, by dinner-time.

"I was waiting table," wrote Albert in a letter to Jane that night, "and I wish you had seen him proposing my health and all of them drinking it, and I wish you had seen them after prayers shaking hands all round, and then first Miss C. and then old D. giving me their farewell blessings. It was a picture. But especially, my dear, I wish you had seen the stones—rubies, emeralds, and sapphires—that were blinking round me all the time. One old pussy—a Mrs. Pitmirran—had a diamond sun on, worth I am sure at least a thousand pounds, that it would have been as easy to gather as a dandelion if that infernal government of ours had only known how to conduct a war without interfering with civilian employments in the way it's doing."

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

WHICH GIVES SOME ACCOUNT OF AN ENCHANTED WOOD
AND OF WHAT BEFEL A HERO THERE

THE same train which bore Japp away from Bartonsmuir carried also another letter addressed to Rathness whose arrival caused quite a sensation in a small way and necessitated the holding of another council.

It met as soon as Captain Piffard had a free hour and held its sitting round the drawing-room fire at the Gables.

"Begin by reading the letter, Fred," said Mrs. Alleyne in her most business-like manner.

She leaned back then in a big arm-chair and lit a cigarette while Fred took the letter out of its envelope.

"It's from that Miss Charteris again," he said.

"DEAR MRS. ALLEYNE,—I have been asked by Miss Barton to write and ask you if you know of any one who would take the post of chauffeur and general odd-man here in place of one who has felt it to be his duty to enlist for war service. He would have a comfortable three-roomed lodge at his disposal, and the terms, which will be settled on his arrival, will be liberal. The motor is being little used, but as the gardener has also enlisted, his duty—which includes at present the planting and drying of medicinal herbs—would fall to be done by the new-comer. This, however, with occasional window-cleaning and bath-chair work, would be all that he would be expected to undertake.

"Miss Barton hopes that among the many men of all sorts that you know you may happen to find some one suitable. Any old derelict she bids me say would do, provided that he is thoroughly honest and of an even temper."

"There, Captain Piffard," said Mrs. Alleyne triumphantly. "Now, do you see an opening?"

"For me, do you mean?" said Captain Piffard.

Mrs. Alleyne laughed.

"For you—in a sense—yes," she said. "I call it providential. Now you can put some one in this place to keep watch upon that serpent Albert."

"Yes, I could," said Piffard, "if I had any one to put there."

"But you know hundreds of people," urged Mrs. Alleyne. "They can't *all* have enlisted."

"No, but they haven't all brains," said Piffard. "It will take brains to do this job, also some pluck and any amount of energy. It will need some one, too, who can play a part and not give himself away. You know what Albert is."

"Of course," said Mrs. Alleyne, "but surely some one can be found. Some one *must* be found. It would be criminal not to take this opportunity. When I think of these poor old things, the Wrack-straws, at his mercy there, it makes me quite ill. I have hardly slept at all since I heard of it. Something must be done or I must write and warn them."

"If you do that," said Piffard, "we lose an excellent opportunity of catching him. He's in a trap now if we can only close it on him."

"Then why are you so indifferent about it?" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne impatiently.

"I'm not indifferent," said Piffard, "but the only man I know who has not enlisted and who would go like a shot is another detective."

"Ah, then it's jealousy, is it?"

"Yes, it's jealousy," said Piffard. "I *may* survive the war, you know, and if I do I shall badly need my work—for many reasons. I didn't let Albert go twice scot-free to hand him over to another man."

"You are candid," said Mrs. Alleyne coldly. "So you

yourself are giving Albert a third opportunity at the expense of the poor old Wrack-straws? Well, Captain Piffard, I did not think it of you."

"Do wait till I have finished," exclaimed Piffard. "I said I only knew one man who would go like a shot instead of me, but I do know another who would be the very person if he *would* go. That man over there," and he pointed with his cigarette.

"Fred!" exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne.

"*Me!*" exclaimed Fred sitting up.

Captain Piffard laughed.

"We are to be partners, you know," he said.

"Well, Fred," said Mrs. Alleyne, leaning forward in her chair all eagerness. "Well, Fred, will you go? You have still *some* leave."

Fred thought for a moment, his eyes kindling, the spirit of adventure awakening within him, rising up and trampling down for the moment the spirits of baulked passion and despair that had been rending him. A wonderful lightness and sense of relief came with it, an irresponsibility and gaiety that had not been his for months. . . . The two sitting watching him saw the transformation and wondered. Yet neither of them spoke till—

"Do you think I could learn the bath-chair work and the window-cleaning in the time?" he said at last.

"Oh, you will go—you will!" cried Mrs. Alleyne clapping her hands. "He's going, Captain Piffard!"

"Yes. I'll go, partner," said Fred.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the captain in his turn starting up. "This is a stroke of luck. This is splendid of you, Lorimer."

Fred laughed the first hearty laugh he had laughed for a long time.

"Not half so splendid as it is of you nominating me," he said. "What if I make a hash of the whole thing?"

"You won't do that," said Piffard with conviction. "You are not the kind of man that makes hashes."

"I'll write at once," said Mrs. Alleyne springing up. "Aunt Caroline and Aunt Emily will be off their heads with joy."

"Why?" said Fred, suddenly holding her arm to detain her. "What are you going to write to them?"

"That a V.C. from the Battle of the Marne is coming to do odd-man for them," said Mrs. Alleyne excitedly, "who knows all about motors from motor-bicycles to flying-machines, and was besides—this is for Aunt Caroline—at the beginning of the war—one of the best students of that year at Oxford."

"Sit down, Lottie," said her nephew peremptorily. "If you write that to them I'll not go a single step."

"But, Fred——"

"I won't. Sit down and I'll tell you what to say."

"Do sit down, Mrs. Alleyne," said Captain Piffard.

"Very well," she said, subsiding into her chair again, "but please, Fred, don't be silly. Let the poor old Wrack-straws have the pleasure—the *ecstasy*—of entertaining a V.C."

"Aunt Lottie," said Fred. "I would do anything to oblige you——"

"Except what I want you to do," said Mrs. Alleyne pouting.

"But I will not go with a label on," said Fred. "I have given you my reasons before. I may be all wrong, but that's how I feel. Besides I want a change during those last weeks, the last perhaps in which I may be alive and intact. I'll be a motor-man for you, a gardener, a window-cleaner, a detective if you like. But I don't want to have to prattle about the front."

There was a moment's silence after the word fell as with the sound of a distant knell between them.

"We must accept his terms, Mrs. Alleyne," said Captain Piffard then. "You must write. What would you like written about you, Lorimer?"

"Say," said Fred, "that you have found a man called

James Green, inexperienced except in motor-work, but willing to do his best at the other things. You can add that he is honest and of an even temper."

"Well, after what you have said I must," said Mrs. Alleyne rising, "but I tell you, Fred, that I feel as though my name were Wolff and I were going to Berlin to write an Official Statement."

After she had gone the two men smoked in silence for a time, listening to the rain which had begun to fall outside.

"Of course you are remembering, Lorimer," said Piffard at last, "that both old Tosh and Albert know you."

"I was just thinking of that," said Fred, "but I can write to old Tosh and tell him that I am following up a trail and——"

"No, no, better see him," said Piffard. "Who knows but that Albert may read all his letters?"

"Well then, I'll see him," said Fred, "and get him to tell Albert that I am travelling incognito and that if he breathes a syllable to any one about my not being James Green he will dismiss him."

"That will do," said Piffard. "Albert won't want to be dismissed just yet. The only difficulty will be in getting to see old Tosh first."

"Well, where would be the fun of it all," laughed Fred, "if there were no difficulty?"

Piffard looked at him curiously.

"This little enterprise is quite cheering you up," he said. Fred laughed again, flushing a little.

"Have I been so dull?" he said.

"Well—up and down," said Piffard. "Mostly down I think."

He paused for a moment.

"I say, Lorimer," he went on hurriedly. "I suppose it's about the limit out there, isn't it? I know you hate speaking of it, but——"

"Yes, before women," said Fred. "Somehow I—I can't

bear it. I'm a fool, of course, but I can't stand hearing them talking of it. You see they think they understand. They have a kind of picture in their minds, and give one a wild desire at times to tear it down and show them the truth—which would be impossible of course. . . . But you'll see for yourself soon."

"It's strange," said the other, "to hear you talk like this after what you've done."

"Now for heaven's sake, Piffard," said Fred, "don't talk of what I've done. I've done no more than thousands have done, and very much less than thousands have done really. . . . It's not a question of heroism, it's chance and brute violence and brute instinct of self-defence and conceit that makes you willing to die rather than appear a coward before company—that's why I hate and loathe this V.C. business. 'Look at me,' I seem always to be saying, 'how brave and noble I am!' Pah! It's monstrous!"

Piffard sat silent for a moment gazing into the fire.

"I understand," he said at last. "I should feel just the same about such an honour except for one thing——" He hesitated. "I could imagine it a fine thing to have it to bring home to a woman if you loved her."

He paused again, but Fred sat silent looking at him.

"Whether she loved you or not," said Piffard.

"Piffard, old man," said Fred after a moment, "I've sometimes wondered—is—is it Lottie?"

Piffard's eyes met his and in them he read his answer.

"And—and——" said Fred again, "I've no business I know—but won't she have you then?"

"No, there is some one else," said Piffard to the depths of the fire again. "But—she has been good enough not to shut me out altogether—to let me come as before till I go away. . . . You see things are different just now. Things that would be impossible at other times are not impossible now. Life to me has become strangely bounded, Lorimer—

shut in—I can't express it. . . . I suppose it means that I am near the finish."

"I know what you mean," said Fred simply, without contradiction or re-assurance. "'A place to stand and love in for awhile,'" he added quietly, "'with darkness and the death-hour rounding it.'"

"Who said that?" said Piffard. "He might have said it for me."

"It was a woman," said Fred. But just then the door opened.

"Stop talking about women," said Mrs. Alleyne's cheerful voice as she crossed the room behind them, "and listen to this. 'Dear Miss Charteris,' she went on, reading the letter in her hand, 'I have just received your note and am pleased to be able to tell you that I have already found you a very suitable man. Please tell my aunts with my love that his name is James Green and that, though inexperienced except in motors, he is willing to learn the other things. Being out of work for the time he is anxious to begin as soon as possible, and, as you say the lodge is vacant, I have told him he may go to you to-morrow. He is a good walker so that it will be quite unnecessary for any one to meet him at the railway station. I am sure that as odd-man you will find him quite a treasure.—Yours sincerely, CAROLINE CHARLOTTE ALLEYNE.'"

"The only thing I don't like," said Fred, "is that bit about the treasure. It's a gross exaggeration and you know it."

"Yes, but I did it to save telling lies," she answered. "I could not say you were honest as you were going under an assumed name, and I couldn't say you were of an even temper, so what was I to do, Freddie?"

"Well, let it stand," said Fred laughing, "though why taking a nom de guerre should be called dishonest I can't see. It is not as though I were to be myself at all. For the next month or so I am to be a totally different person."

"Bravo!" said Piffard rising. "I knew you were the

kind of man. Give me the letter, Mrs. Alleyne, and I'll post it on the way home."

Mrs. Alleyne was seated at a little desk near the door stamping and directing the envelope. At the word, however, she turned in her chair.

"Home?" she said. "To your lodgings do you mean?"

Piffard nodded in silence looking at her. The rain was pattering drearily upon the window-panes.

"Have you nothing more to do to-night?" she said gently.

"No," he answered.

"Then your home is here for this evening," she announced. "Johnson shall post the Official Statement."

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So Johnson in snow-boots and rain-coat, for he was rheumatic, went the hundred yards to the pillar-box and posted the letter, and in due course it arrived at Bartonsmuir when the Wrack-straws were assembled in the drawing-room after dinner.

Albert had left that morning and a sense of bereavement was upon the party. Sanders and Williams handing round coffee looked inadequate and awkward, and Mr. Tosh had a neglected appearance which Mrs. Bellairs described as heartrending.

"His tie is quite squint, poor dear," she said aside to Ann when she had beckoned her into a corner, "and he has lost or forgotten one of his sleeve-links too. Would he be offended, do you think, if I offered to lend him a pair of my late Arthur's?"

"Oh, better not," said Ann hastily. "He would think it very kind I am sure—but you know he has rather a quick temper."

Mrs. Bellairs laughed her comfortable laugh as she patted her own plump arms contentedly.

"Well, well, my dear," she said, "so had my late Arthur. There isn't much about tempers that I don't know. You

are quite right. Besides Mr. Tosh seems happy enough without his sleeve-links."

Ann looked down the long room to where Mrs. Fennimore and Miss Emily were playing bridge against the author of "The Utter Impossibility" and Mrs. Pitmirran.

"He is winning," said Mrs. Bellairs. "I can see that by Sophia's grumpiness and Bethia's complacency. It does Bethia good to win. She is beaming like that ridiculous diamond sun of hers."

A half unwilling grin indeed was spreading over Mrs. Pitmirran's large face when Ann's attention was distracted from her by the arrival of the post-bag.

This was attended by another of the ceremonials with which the even tenor of life at Bartonsmuir was punctuated. When half-past eight arrived Miss Caroline always moved to the round table near the fire where the big lamp with the rose-coloured shade was. Here she received the post-bag and the key to it from Arbuthnot. Then with the aid of a long-handled eye-glass in solemn silence she sorted the letters out upon the table, and until they were all allocated to their various little heaps it was tacitly understood that no one should approach them.

Ann watched her that night with some impatience.

"Are you expecting one from Him?" said Mrs. Bellairs sympathetically.

"No," said Ann. "I had one this morning. But I do hope there will be one from Mrs. Alleyne to-night."

"Ah—about the new man—I had forgotten," said Mrs. Bellairs. "The dear knows nothing of Lottie being her predecessor," she added to herself as she watched Ann going down the room to the letter-table. "She's a lovely girl and a good mover, as poor dear Arthur used to say. . . . Well, well . . . *Où sont les neiges d'antan?*"

For a moment the room transformed itself into a ball-room of twenty years ago with two young lovers dancing together and all the other couples watching.

When she came to herself she saw that Ann was seated

beside Miss Caroline and with flushed cheeks and eager eyes reading aloud a letter to her. Miss Caroline was nodding pleased assent to every half-dozen words, her pearl tassels trembling with satisfaction.

"Good news or I'm a duchess," said Mrs. Bellairs to herself as she hoisted herself from her low chair and stepped down the room to them.

"You will be glad to hear, Maud," said Miss Caroline when Mrs. Bellairs had established herself near her in the most comfortable seat available, "that Lottie is sending an excellent man to us. Kindly read the letter again, Miss Charteris. This is really very fortunate, Emily," she added, raising her voice.

Miss Emily, who was dealing at the moment, looked at Ann with an agonised expression.

"Oh, please don't speak to her now, Miss Caroline," said Ann hastily. "Remember—Mr. Tosh——"

"You are quite right, Miss Charteris," said Miss Caroline, graciously. "I was wrong to have forgotten. Now read the letter. Are you listening, Maud?"

"I am all ears," said Mrs. Bellairs enthusiastically as she twiddled the rings on her still pretty fingers.

"My dear Miss Charteris," Ann read aloud. "I have just received your note and am pleased to be able to tell you that I have already found you a very suitable man. Please tell my aunts with my love that his name is James Green——"

"A good name," said Mrs. Bellairs. "It brings the man before one—rather plain, but sensible-looking."

"And that though inexperienced except in motors," Ann went on, "he is willing to learn the other things."

"I like that spirit, Maud," here put in Miss Caroline.

"Being out of work for the time——" Ann continued.

"Ah, that adds another touch," said Mrs. Bellairs. "One sees him now, plain and sensible-looking, but rather shabby."

"He is anxious to begin work as soon as possible," Ann persevered, "and as you say the lodge is vacant——"

"We did not say that," said Miss Caroline, "but I dare say we implied it."

"I have told him he may go to you the day after to-morrow——"

"That is to-morrow now," interjected Mrs. Bellairs.

"He is a good walker," Ann went on steadily, "so that it will be quite unnecessary for any one to meet him at the railway station. I am sure that as odd-man you will find him quite a treasure.—Yours sincerely, CAROLINE CHARLOTTE ALLEYNE."

"She sends no message to you, Maud," said Miss Caroline. "That is strange."

"It would be strange if she *did* rather," laughed Mrs. Bellairs. "She has no idea that I am here."

"No idea that you are here?" exclaimed Miss Caroline, "when your nephew is staying there?"

"My good soul," said Mrs. Bellairs, "he doesn't know either."

"Do you mean," said Miss Caroline stiffening, "that you concealed the fact of your coming here, Maud? Are you ashamed of being a Wrack-straw?"

"Not a bit," said Mrs. Bellairs, "though with all due deference to you, Caroline, I ought to be, you know. But you have made it possible for me, you see, to exist with some sort of self-respect. I think of my five maids, poor things, and the butler, and the motor-man, and I say to myself, 'They're all working for the government and doing seven times as much as I could have done,' whenever I feel depressed about it."

"Why then did you not write to your nephew?" said Miss Caroline, firmly returning to the point.

"Partly because I was angry with him," said Mrs. Bellairs, "because he has a V.C. and won't give me any good of it. I told you he had refused to come and stay with me because I said in my letter of invitation that

I had told all the neighbourhood about him. Partly, however, and mostly," she added, "the reason he doesn't know where I am is that I never can write to anybody except once in a blue moon. I am so incorrigibly lazy about writing letters."

"Miss Charteris," said Miss Caroline turning to Ann, "when you write your letter of thanks to Mrs. Alleyne kindly inform her that Mrs. Bellairs is here."

"Yes, Miss Caroline," said Ann. "Should I do it now do you think?"

"No," said Miss Caroline. "Better see for what we have to thank her first."

"Scotchwoman!" laughed Mrs. Bellairs. "Can't you trust to your presentiments?"

"I have no presentiments," said Miss Caroline, "and if I had I should not believe in them."

"But surely you believe Lottie?" said Mrs. Bellairs.

"I believe that she *means* well," said Miss Caroline.

"Miss Charteris, I trust to you to see that the West Lodge is prepared," she added with the air of a queen giving orders for the preparation of a royal palace, or so Mrs. Bellairs described it later that night when Ann was brushing her hair for her.

"Yes, and I love her for doing it," said Ann. "It makes you feel grand, like Sir Walter Raleigh."

Ann felt less grand next day, however, when she saw in what state Japp had left the West Lodge.

Williams and she, attired for house-cleaning in overalls, stood paralysed for the moment by the deplorable aspect of it, and Maggie the between-maid, who had come as reinforcement, ejaculated, "Eh, mercy on us!"

"Of course Japp would be very excited when he went away," said Ann, willing to make every excuse for a soldier.

"I would excite him more if I saw him now," said Williams vindictively. "Did he think we hadna work enough already at the Big Hoose?"

"Go back to it then," said Ann firing up, "and I'll do this by myself, with Maggie."

"No, no, miss," said Williams hastily. "It was jist a mainner o' speakin' like."

"Miss Charteris is a madam and no mistake," she reported afterwards. "But, my certy, she can work."

It was already three in the afternoon, nevertheless, when Ann finally left the West Lodge. She had had no lunch and was ravenous, but with a feeling of satisfaction she paused for a moment on the threshold to look back at her completed task.

The little house was now as neat as a new pin. All the rubbish had been cleared out. The bed had been hauled and pushed into the other room. The diamond-paned windows shone like diamonds. The two chairs and the table were transfigured with polishing. So was the white clock with its painted wreath. So was the dresser, but they had utterly failed to clean either behind it or beneath it, for from its place against the wall it had utterly refused to budge. They might as well, as Williams said, have tried to move the Scott Monument, and to Ann it seemed that the two white china dogs with black ears and tails which sat grinning on its top shelf were regarding her derisively.

But the fire was lit, the glow of it was reflected everywhere, the cloth was laid, the materials for a meal were ready.

"Well, James Green," she said as she went out closing the door after her, "if you're not satisfied and gratified, you ought to be!"

It was several hours later, however, before James Green came to see what had been done for him. The first shadow of dusk was already over everything when shouldering his suit-case he marched out of the station with his face towards Bartonsmuir and his back to the sunset.

"Wha is't, think ye?" said Macfarlane the porter to Crombie the stationmaster, as the two stood watching the stalwart figure striding down the road.

"It's a Mister James Green," said the stationmaster. "I had a letter for him and that was the name on it."

"A letter?"

"Ay, a note-like from Miss Charteris at the Big Hoose."

"Is he her sweetheart, think ye?"

"Bless ye, no! She's gettin' a doctor they tell me. He's the new man that's come in place o' Johnnie Japp. He's to live in the West Lodge an' be a kind o' orra-man."

"Never!" ejaculated the porter.

"That's what they tell me," said Crombie.

"But this man's gentry!" argued Macfarlane.

"Aweel, gentry or no' gentry—that's what they tell me," persisted Crombie.

"Weel, weel," said Macfarlane, giving in to his superior, "things is a' fair upside doon the noo."

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James Green, meanwhile, all unaware of this discussion, was sniffing the fragrance of the April twilight with the appreciation of a man just delivered from a stuffy railway carriage. After he was well away from the station he did not hurry. It seemed to him all at once that it was a very long time since he had been out alone and on foot in the heart of the country. The hedges on either side of the road were veiled in living green. A sense of spring was everywhere, a light as of other days, a glamour quite indescribable that was more than half remembrance. Little flowers he knew greeted him like old friends—celandines, potentillas—that for long he had not had time to notice. In the distance he could see the wood heaped and dim beyond which, according to the note of guidance, lay his destination. As he thought of it he took the note out of his pocket again. She was very precise, this Miss Charteris. The handwriting was neat though rather hurried and had quaint little twirls at intervals.

"On leaving the station," the note ran, "go straight along the road until you come to the place where three

roads meet. Then take the one to the left where the twisted elder-tree is and follow it till you come to the first entrance gate on the right. The West Lodge is just inside. There you will find supper waiting, and at nine o'clock Miss Barton hopes that you will come up to the house for prayers, after which she will arrange an interview, when the terms of payment will be settled."

He had been walking on while he read and now looking up he saw the twisted elder-tree right before him, and an invisible thrush was singing somewhere among its branches so exquisitely that he had to pause for a moment to listen to it. As he did so and the wonderful song went on, he idly pictured to himself the woman who had written those things—the successor to Lottie's former lover.

"She'll be an old man's darling," he said to himself, "pretending to be more babyish than she really is, or she will be one of the painfully cheerful kind, always grinning and tactful. And this after Lottie!"

Then as the thrush still sang, the wild sweet music linked up the thought of the old dead love with his living one, and for the first time since the adventure began he felt the tide of misery returning upon him.

Starting forward with a smothered exclamation he scared the bird into sudden silence, and changing the suit-case he was carrying to his other shoulder he chose aright by mere chance and took the road to the left.

The way now was bounded only by level fields and the wood as he drew nearer to it seemed to lie right across it. It stood out from the grey landscape with a queer distinctness because of a strange faint radiance behind it, and presently as he approached he realised that this luminous background was the sea, so calm, so still, that it seemed to be part of the sky above it. It was curious in the quiet to see how wind-swept the trees were, all bent a little towards the sunset. It deepened the sense of unreality that possessed him as he found himself at last in the shadow of them. Hardly, however, was he there before he came upon the old gateway

with urns wreathed in stone flowers crowning its weather-worn pillars.

The gate itself stood hospitably open, but the drive which was little wider than a cart-track disappeared after a hundred yards or so into what seemed to be a dense thicket.

Just inside the gate, however, and withdrawn into a narrow garden stood a small grey house hoary with age and half-buried in greenery.

"My lodge as I am alive!" he exclaimed.

Then he pushed open the wicket and went rejoicing up the pathway.

As he ate and drank he reflected upon his plans, taking at the same time stock of his surroundings. The more he did so the more they pleased him. The white china dogs with black ears and tails seated on the dresser afforded him special enjoyment. He envied them. They were so absolutely self-satisfied. The old white clock too with its gaudy wreath, its hanging weights, and its brass-headed pendulum charmed him. Even the gilt-framed portrait of Queen Victoria in gorgeous attire which hung over the mantelpiece seemed invested with a new and eerie interest.

"Poor old lady," he said to himself. "Does she know in heaven that she is the grandmother of a devil incarnate?"

This thought, however, suggested others that were better dismissed for that time. He sprang up and piling the dishes out of the way sat down again with his fountain-pen and a pad of writing-paper.

"At the West Lodge," he wrote, "in the midst of the Enchanted Wood.

"Madam,—Your obedient servant James Green salutes you.

"I arrived here an hour ago. You know the road from the station, and I need not describe it to you. I shall only tell you that it was a grey night, fragrant, dream-

like, and that a thrush was singing on the twisted elder-tree where the three roads meet. This wood you have lived in yourself. I shall see where you lived presently when I go up to the Big House, as the worthy stationmaster calls it. But I am sure, my dear and aristocratic aunt, you never realised what a blissful dwelling-place this little West Lodge is. When you rolled past it in your carriage or cavorted past it on your horse you only looked upon it as the place where the person lived who opened the gate for you, or at best you looked in occasionally to visit a retainer and say it was a fine day and how were all the children?

"My dear, we folks in the big houses miss a hundred little pleasures quite unconsciously. I feel that I am going to enjoy myself as James Green more perhaps than I ever did before in all my life. Soon I shall be lighting my lamp—a queer old thing with a porcelain stand which has a crooked cottage painted on it. It is early dark here under the trees and in the midst of the rhododendrons. One is nearer the dear old earth in a cottage. I am part of the wood here. I can hear the trees whispering over my roof. Through my open window the scent you love of withered leaves and damp moss is coming in with the twilight. I have only to cross the threshold to be in the midst of it all.

"But you know the rest. What you don't know about is the inside of this cottage and the delight it is to have it all to myself, though you know too—and I need not tell you again—how much I enjoyed being with you, my dear. And do not think that in my ecstasies I am forgetting my commission. I have not managed—tell Piffard—to see Mr. Tosh yet, but I mean to do so as soon as possible. Meantime, I have refrained from going to prayers as I was requested to do in a note left for me with the stationmaster by the indefatigable Miss Charteris. My presence might have interfered with Mr. Tosh's and Albert's devotions. I shall go up afterwards, however, and ask for an interview with my employers. Indeed, on looking at my fascinating clock which I wish I had time to describe, I find that it is

already late. I shall continue this letter, therefore, when the interview is over."

Fred, after that night, did not believe in presentiments any more than Miss Caroline did, for if ever he should have had some foreboding it should have been when he was walking up the narrow winding drive to the Big House. Yet up it he went with his mind full of everything and anything but of what was going to happen to him, and he was so deep in thought that he startled the house by ringing the front-door bell before he remembered with confusion that, as James Green, he had no right to take such liberties.

He was on the point of beating a retreat when the door was opened by Arbuthnot.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I should have gone to the back door."

Arbuthnot looked bewildered, as well she might.

"I am James Green," he explained, "the new—er—lodge-keeper."

For one moment Arbuthnot's bewilderment gave place to astonishment. Then all expression faded from her well-trained countenance.

"Miss Barton has been expecting you," she said. "Come in."

The omission of the "sir" was a little difficult.

"For whatever he was besides I saw he was a gentleman born," she said afterwards. "But seein' he is a servant now he must just take a servant's treatment. Things is mixed up enough already without me sayin' 'sir' to orramen."

"I'll let Miss Barton know you're here," she said as she ushered the stranger into the morning-room.

It was later, however, than Fred imagined. The fascinating clock happened to be an hour slow. Therefore, when Arbuthnot, according to promise, brought up the announcement that James Green the new man was waiting below, Miss Caroline was already in déshabille and Miss Emily in the depths of her four-poster.

"Dear, dear!" said the latter appearing at her sister's door in her dressing-gown. "This is very awkward. He will think it so unbusiness-like of us not to see him. Caroline, could you not put on your——"

"No," said Miss Caroline. "No, Emily, I could not put on anything again just now either to oblige you or James Green. Miss Charteris, however, is still presentable. Kindly go down and see him, Miss Charteris, and say that owing to the lateness of the hour we must postpone our business conversation until to-morrow."

Ann laid down the brush with which she was doing Miss Caroline's hair, patted her own locks which had become somewhat dishevelled, gave a shake by way of adjustment to her white evening gown, and ran lightly down the stairs to carry out these instructions.

As she went she wondered with some amusement if James Green would answer to Mrs. Bellairs's mental picture of him.

"Plain, sensible-looking, and shabby," she repeated to herself. Then she opened the door of the morning-room.

Fred was standing with his back to her when she entered looking at the contents of the book-case opposite the doorway.

"He is not shabby anyhow," she said to herself. "He has very well-made Harris tweeds on."

"Good evening," she said aloud.

Then he turned and saw her.

"And he's not plain either," was her thought as their eyes met. "But how strange that he does not speak!"

Then, with surprise, she saw that he had paled to the very lips.

"Can it be that he is shy?" she thought uneasily.

"Miss Barton is sorry," she began, flushing a little as she spoke, for the man's eyes seemed to hold hers prisoners for the moment by some strange appeal in them which she felt almost distressingly but could not understand, "Miss Barton is sorry that it is too late for her to see you to-

night. She hopes you will come again early to-morrow morning."

But still he did not speak, and Ann had nothing more to communicate.

"Good night," she said, with an attempt at briskness.

Then, however, the extraordinary James Green seemed suddenly to recover his power of utterance.

"Thank you very much," he said. "I must apologise for being so late and for—for being so stupid just now. You are very like some one I—know."

"Am I?" she said wondering.

"Would—would you mind telling me who you are?" he said hoarsely.

"I am Miss Charteris," said Ann, "the companion here, the secretary, sometimes," she added smiling, "I think I am the maid of all work."

"Thank you," said James Green quietly, but Ann's smile met with no response.

"He just opened the door for me," she reported afterwards, "and we said good night. He's to come at ten to-morrow morning."

"I hope you found him sensible-looking," said Miss Caroline.

"He *talked* quite sensibly," said Ann, and no one noticed the slight emphasis.

Alone in her own room, however, she began to wonder again about James Green, his strange manner, and the strangeness altogether of his being at Bartonsmuir, young, strong, and evidently a gentleman, filling the post of the derelict they had advertised for. She went to sleep thinking about it, worrying about it rather; it seemed so incompatible with the whole aspect of the man that he should be a slacker. Yet what else could he be here?

Mingled with this feeling about the new-comer was a vague wonder as to who the girl was whom she so resembled.

She had advanced in experience since her engagement.

"He is in love with her whoever she is," was her last conscious thought.

But James Green, with his clenched hands thrust into the pockets of his coat, sat all night by the dead fire at the West Lodge, staring with unseeing eyes before him, and striving to adjust himself to the grand finale of all his hopes.

His unfinished letter lay in fragments on the floor, the lamp with the crooked cottage on it smoked unheeded, and the gorgeous old queen from her gilt frame over the mantel-piece looked down in triumph upon the man who had dared to pity her.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

IN WHICH ANN CHARTERIS FALLS FOUL OF TWO WRACK-STRAWS IN ONE EVENING

DAWN, however, stealing in at the diamond-paned windows, found the occupant of the West Lodge all but prepared to tackle circumstances once more, and realising that, bad as things were, they might have been worse still.

He might never have seen Ann Charteris again.

Ann. . . . He delighted in the quaint little name.

Now he might see her and even speak to her every day perhaps for weeks.

A memory of his talk with Piffard here occurred to him.

"Even if she does not love you," he quoted.

He was surprised to find himself exhilarated by this thought.

The spirit of adventure, cast down the night before by the shock of his strange meeting with the unknown girl of his dreams and the discovery that she, who was the centre of everything to him, was the betrothed of Lottie's former lover, now took possession of him again and more completely than ever.

For the first time he was keenly interested in his commission. He had felt sorry for the poor old Wrack-straws left at the mercy of Albert, but now he was filled with indignation and horror at the mere thought of Ann's peace of mind being endangered. There was a certain satisfaction, too, amid all the bitterness in the reflection that by right of his present post he might do this service for his beloved before going out to the front again and making there a decent exit.

After long uncertainty, to come face to face with anything, even the direst misfortune, is invigorating to some natures. It was undoubtedly the clear vision of what he had now

to do that enabled the unhappy Fred to make a fresh start that morning.

As the clock struck five, meaning six, he rose stiffly from his seat, and bracing himself both mentally and bodily set about lighting his fire again. He was tremendously active for about half-an-hour after that, clearing off his supper-dishes, filling his kettle, even winding up the clock and setting it to the right time. At last, however, he had to sit down to breakfast and then once more the wraith of Ann, as it always did, came and sat beside him.

But to-day it was a different Ann. It was not the girl of the railway carriage, pale, black-robed, with tears trembling on her eyelashes. It was Ann as she had been revealed to him the night before, more lovely even than he had thought and ten thousand times more lovable. It was Ann intent on the business she had in hand, but ready all the same in passing to be a good comrade to him. It was Ann distracting because of her utter unconsciousness that all the time he could hardly help kneeling down and worshipping her. It was Ann—he smiled in spite of everything at the thought of it—with boyish frankness taking stock of him, to give a report of him to her employers doubtless with the same precision which had characterised her letters.

Those letters. . . . How he wished now he had kept them all. He took out the last again, the little unsigned note which had been handed to him at the railway station. He read once more the directions in it about the road through the twilit fields which was to lead him to her. Then suddenly within him something new stirred as he remembered how his eyes had held hers prisoners for one great moment, till shadows began to darken in them and the warm colour in her cheeks to deepen.

That way, however, lay confusion.

"I'm not a bounder anyhow, I hope," he said aloud.

As the memory still persisted, however, he left his meal unfinished, lit a cigarette, and set off to look for the motor-house.

He soon found himself in a fine old stable-yard surrounded by ancient buildings and paved with cobblestones, where it was easy on that misty morning to imagine a coach and four getting ready with horns sounding and postillions mounting. The motor when he found it, however, was no illusion. If Japp's lodge had been in an unsatisfactory condition he had left his motor in still worse case, and Albert prematurely reft away had not had time to clean it.

Fred's face lengthened when he saw it. Next moment, however, his coat was off and he was hard at work. There was a modern tap fortunately as well as the venerable pump, and a hose, and everything he needed. In an hour he had his charge in a wonderfully decent state, and, being by this time more than ready for it, he went home and finished his forsaken breakfast.

He was making toast at the fire when he was startled by the loud ringing of an electric bell just behind the chair where he was sitting.

"A telephone, by Jove!" he exclaimed. "A telephone in the enchanted forest?"

A telephone it was, indeed, with the bell ringing rather violently. He took up the receiver and started as a voice he knew addressed him.

"Yes, Miss Charteris," he answered, as well as he could, then remembered too late that he ought to have said, "Yes, miss."

"Miss Barton hopes you have had a comfortable night."

"Oh, yes, thank you," he said smiling grimly.

"She hopes to see you at twelve o'clock," Ann went on. "Meantime, she would like you to go to the East Lodge—you come up the drive to the house and then pass the house and go down the other drive—and see if Mr. Tosh who is living there requires any attendance."

This startled him in another manner.

"But I thought——" he began, before he remembered

just in time that he was not supposed to know anything about Mr. Tosh.

Ann, intent on her message, however, had not heard him.

"His man is away," she said, "and he has a chill this morning and was not able to come up to breakfast. Miss Barton would like you to go as soon as possible."

"I'll go immediately," said Fred.

Instantly he was rung off.

He laughed ruefully to himself as he put on his coat again.

The secretary had had no time for even one word on her own account. This, however, he reflected was perhaps just as well if he was to retain any presence of mind that morning.

As it was he was halfway up the drive before he realised his extraordinary good fortune in having the chance of seeing Mr. Tosh alone.

"This adventure is too easy," he reflected. "It is uncannily easy. Can it be that I am too late? It is not like Albert to take a holiday. Has he cleared off with the spoils already?" The thought made him hasten his steps and presently the Big House loomed up out of the mist before him.

It was a real Big House with a long irregular front added to evidently by many owners of many different tastes. Parts of it looked very old and it was all picturesque with a weird air of dishevelment about it, probably because of the gardener's absence. Here and there long trails of loosened greenery waved rakishly and defiantly from chimney-stacks and gable-ends. A great sheet of ivy had become detached in one place.

"I must have that tacked up anyhow," said the new gardener to himself.

He was so absorbed in looking at the house and in wondering into which part of the interior the secretary's activities had led her that he did not notice another of the inhabitants leaning on the stone railing of a low balcony quite near him.

The shocks of that morning were as nothing, therefore,

to that which he received on hearing himself suddenly addressed by his real name.

"Is it necessary, Fred Lorimer," said a mellow voice just above him, "that you should add insult to injury by cutting your aunt stone dead?"

He looked up dismayed and became aware of Mrs. Bellairs.

She had a mushroom hat on which gave her a comfortably rural air and she wore a large rather shabby cloak into which her arms were folded. Her usually good-humoured face, however, was set into the semblance of a frown.

"Aunt Maud!" said Fred faintly.

"Don't address me as aunt," she said severely. "I have renounced you for ever, sir, since your recent behaviour to me."

Even as she spoke, however, the frown relaxed somewhat.

"Go down on your knees on the gravel there," she commanded him, "and beg my pardon. Afterwards you may explain to me what you are doing here."

But in two steps Fred was close under the balcony.

"Aunt Maud," he said hurriedly. "Let me off this once, and for heaven's sake don't give me away, there's a dear. I'm here incognito on some one else's business—I've got the post as James Green and it would spoil everything if I were recognised. I shall explain everything whenever I am allowed to—only it is some one else's business you understand."

Mrs. Bellairs's face while he was speaking was a study. By the time he had finished, between excitement and curiosity she had evidently quite forgotten her resentment.

"My dear," she said, leaning over the balcony and speaking in a whisper though there was no sign of any one near. "Just one thing. *Is* it a love-affair?"

"No—oh, no——" said Fred hastily, but even as he spoke he felt to his disgust that his face was turning a brilliant crimson.

Mrs. Bellairs laughed softly.

"I see," she said with great satisfaction. "Well, you couldn't have found a better person for such a thing than your old Aunt Maud, my dear. Whoever it is that you are acting for," she laughed softly again, "he can depend on Maud Bellairs, who—you can tell him—has had too many affairs of her own to spoil sport in her old and ugly days."

Nodding delightedly and waving a plump hand she moved away from him towards the house.

"But, Aunt Maud," he said desperately and as loudly as he dared, "you are quite mistaken—you have quite a wrong impression—you——"

He might never have spoken.

"Tell him he may depend on me, my dear," said Mrs. Bellairs, as wreathed in smiles she disappeared through a French window.

"This is sickening," said Fred to himself. "But she'll keep her word all right, that's one thing."

Another thing, it suddenly occurred to him, was that if he remained there gazing up at the house some one less sympathetic might see him. He therefore hastily took his departure and presently found himself at the door of the East Lodge.

The East Lodge was built exactly like his own little grey home in the west, but it was much primmer and neater and less romantic-looking.

It seemed deserted at first. Just as he was about to knock at the closed door, however, a loud rumbling sound emanated from it as of heavy furniture being moved about. When he knocked this ceased as though at a given signal.

"Go away, I can't see any one just now," said Mr. Tosh's rasping voice.

"I have been sent to inquire, sir, whether you need any attendance," said Fred.

The response was both sudden and unexpected.

The door burst open revealing Mr. Tosh attired in py-jamas and one slipper.

At sight of his visitor, however, he started back in astonishment.

"Good God, Lorimer! You here?" he ejaculated.

"I thought you knew my voice, sir," said Fred disconcerted.

"Your voice? no," said Mr. Tosh. "All I knew was that it was a man's voice and not one of those women-folk that have been pestering me since breakfast-time. Come in—come in. I've had an awful morning, Lorimer."

Fred followed him in and repressed a smile. The room which was very full was like a mixed up jig-saw puzzle. Each article of furniture seemed to be at right angles to its proper place. Even the writing-table had been moved and Walter with it. He now lay aslant like everything else, presiding meditatively over the general upheaval.

"I was sorry to hear that you had had a chill," said Fred.

"Chill!" exclaimed Mr. Tosh. "I have had no chill. But I had to say something to excuse myself coming up to breakfast. The fact is, Lorimer, I've lost my morning trousers with the braces on them, and in the pocket of them the key of the cupboard where all my other clothes are."

"You may laugh," he went on, cackling a little himself in sympathy as Fred was seized with consuming merriment. "But you've never known, Lorimer, what it is to be a man-wrack-straw without a servant in the midst of a lot of women."

At this Fred stopped laughing.

"Without a servant?" he said sharply. "Do you mean to say that Albert has left you for good?"

"Yes. Three days ago," said Mr. Tosh. "And what a three days they have been to me! He was called up by the recruiting-officer and is, I suppose, by now in Southampton."

"Called up?" exclaimed Fred.

"I wish now I had claimed exemption for him," said Mr. Tosh. "He had the sense to suggest it himself. But

I was very annoyed with him just then and I refused. I might have managed to get him let off for a time at least as he was the only man-servant about the house."

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Fred, setting aside this new development for future consideration and going on with his part, "not now that I am here."

"*You*, Lorimer?" said the old man.

"Yes, I," said Fred. "I am here incognito, sir, on Piffard's behalf, you understand. I have taken the post as James Green."

At this Mr. Tosh's eyes nearly started out of his head.

"On Piffard's behalf?" he said in a loud whisper. "Then—if I may ask, Lorimer—is it a case, you mean?"

Fred nodded.

"Is it *the* case?" said Mr. Tosh.

"It is *the* case," said Fred. "We think we are on the trail this time, and as Piffard has to stay with his battalion in Rathness I came to follow it up."

"Do you mean to tell me, Lorimer," said Mr. Tosh in great excitement, "that the villain who stole the lady's diamond pendant that Piffard told us about is actually at Bartonsmuir?"

"No, sir, he's not at Bartonsmuir," said Fred ruefully. "But that's all," he added, "that I am at liberty to tell you at present."

"I understand, I understand," said Mr. Tosh in great glee. "And now, of course, I mustn't breathe a word to anybody. I shall be like the doctor-fellow in those books of Conan Doyle's and you shall come and sharpen your wits upon me."

"Thank you, sir, thank you," said Fred rather absently, as he realised the general askewness of the affair. The adventure, it seemed, was not to be so easy after all, yet who knew but that it might right itself again.

He had always been accustomed to trust to luck, to hold on in face of disappointment, to wait before abandoning

an enterprise until the last second of the eleventh hour. His V.C. had not been given to him for nothing.

"I knew I could count on your assistance," he said, "and when such wits as I have require sharpening I shall come to you—which will be very often," he added laughing.

"Well, for my sake I hope it will," said the self-constituted Dr. Watson.

In this new interest he had quite forgotten the loss which had befallen him.

"I'll come round with you now," he began before he remembered that he was still in his pyjamas. Then, however, he fairly fumed. "Confound that man Albert," he muttered from sheer force of habit while he began fiercely pulling out a chest of drawers from the wall.

Meanwhile Fred, seeing the door into the bedroom open, went in there and by mere chance turned over the pillows on the bed. A mass of crumpled checked tweed then met his astonished gaze.

"Here they are, Mr. Tosh!" he shouted. "You must have put them under your pillow last night."

Mr. Tosh desisted from his onslaught upon the chest of drawers.

"God bless me, so I did!" he exclaimed.

He paused to recollect himself.

"It was because of the key," he added. "I was afraid of losing it."

Then, slapping his thigh delightedly—

"It's a good omen, Sherlock," he said. "You'll succeed, sir. I'll bet you half the royalties of my book you will succeed."

• • • • •
Noon found Fred entering the morning-room once more, possessed with the memory of the last time he had been there and the wild hope that the secretary in one of her many capacities might be in attendance at the interview. No one was there, however, except the two old sisters in whom, he felt, at any other time he would have been very

much more interested. Even as it was he enjoyed Miss Caroline's reception of him which was accompanied by a prolonged inspection through the long-handled eye-glasses, and her mode of issuing her commands, which gave him, like Ann, quite the Sir Walter Raleigh feeling.

Little careworn Miss Emily appealed to him in another manner.

"She seems to live in fear of things happening," he wrote to Lottie afterwards, "of which her loyalty, poor dear, will force her to share the consequences."

"You have been to the East Lodge, I hope?" said the lady paramount after the first greetings.

"Yes, m'm," said Fred, thanking goodness that he had remembered the proper mode of address this time. "I have just come from there."

"You did not find Mr. Tosh very ill, I hope," said Miss Emily anxiously. "Is he feverish?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so, m'm," said Fred gravely. "He feels so much better that he hopes to be up here for lunch."

"I am glad to hear it," said Miss Caroline. "Bed, except in cases of severe illness, is relaxing."

"Perhaps, Caroline," said Miss Emily. "But I hope Mr. Tosh is not over-estimating his strength."

"I hope not, Emily," said her sister, "but now we must attend to business."

For the next half-hour or so she did attend to it, and it was only at the end of that time, when Fred was leaving the house, that Miss Emily had another innings.

"Are you quite sure from your own observation, Green," she said then as she followed him out into the passage, "that Mr. Tosh is fit to come up to luncheon? If not, of course one of us could easily go down and take him some beef-tea."

"On no account do that, m'm," said Fred hastily. "I am afraid that any visitor just now would only cause a—rise of temperature."

He laughed aloud as he went down the drive to his own lodge thinking what a good story he could make of it all to Lottie, but before he reached his door he remembered Piffard and what Piffard would be expecting to hear from him. To write to Lottie was to write to Piffard. Both would be eager to know how he was getting on, and both, he was sure, if they heard that Albert had left Bartonsmuir, would expect him to follow after him immediately. In their place he would have thought the same. What was the good of watching a useless trap? There might be some chance of laying hands on Albert even in his uniform if he were near enough to watch him. Here there was no chance. So of course he must go.

Of course he must.

He repeated this to himself several times to quell a sense of rebellion that suddenly arose within him at the thought of going. He must write immediately to Lottie to send some one to fill his place, and get away from Bartonsmuir on the track of Albert as soon as possible.

Yet—stay. Might it not be better to find out exactly where Albert was first? If he had sailed for Mesopotamia, for instance, he could not follow him up in any case.

Then there would be no particular hurry. He might stay on at Bartonsmuir till his leave was finished.

There was no use dashing off information yet to Lottie either, till he found at least where Albert now was.

He wrote to the recruiting office therefore instead of to Rathness.

"And thank heaven," he said to himself, "they'll probably take weeks to answer."

One of his orders from Miss Caroline had been that he was to take the motor to the railway station to meet a new Wrack-straw—a Miss Gellatly—who was arriving by the train at three o'clock.

"She is very absent-minded, she tells me," Miss Caroline had added, "but Miss Charteris will go with you to attend

to the smaller luggage while you are looking after the larger articles."

"Very good, m'm," he had said quietly enough, but whenever he had allowed himself to think of it since his heart had begun to beat madly.

"Which shows that you daren't so much as look at her," he admonished himself, "if you want to behave at all respectably."

After he had finished his lunch he sat watching the clock till he could stand it no longer and went to dig furiously in his garden. Later he found that he had dug up all the Brussels sprouts which Japp had planted. But the exertion calmed him.

Mrs. Bellairs, herself unseen, was watching at her bedroom window when the big Rolls-Royce swung round the corner of the drive and drew up neatly before the front-door steps.

"How well he looks in his chauffeur's rig-out!" she said to herself, and she was right as to the looks, but the rig-out was Captain Piffard's.

Fortunately for Fred, he did not see his aunt Bellairs as he stood thrilling from head to foot holding the door of the motor open for Ann. His aunt saw him, however, and noted his face as Ann came out.

"Oh, so that's it, is it?" she said to herself, for though her late Arthur had often rebuked her for doing it, she was always jumping to conclusions. "And the worst of it is," she had been wont to reply, "I always find I am right, so that I have no inducement to cure myself of the habit."

She was watching still when the motor returned from the station.

"What do you think of Green now that you have seen him?" she said that evening to Ann.

It was long after dinner, but all the party except themselves were gathered still round the piano at the other end of the room listening to the new Wrack-straw, a withered

old wisp of a woman in draperies of black lace who had brought the remains of what had once been a beautiful voice with her.

"It has a strange, dream-like sound in it," Ann wrote of it to Lowhampton, "like the echo of long silent music. And she sings such queer old songs. I simply love her singing."

So did all the others it seemed. Even Mr. Tosh, faultlessly turned out by Fred for the evening, was forgetting his bridge as he leaned over the piano begging for another and yet another ballad.

"As for me, that 'Bonnie Wee Thing' simply made me disgrace myself," said Mrs. Bellairs, dabbing her eyes. "I am sitting down here so that I can weep in comfort without being a nuisance to people."

Ann had followed her as in duty bound to see what was the matter with her.

"How do I like Green?" she said, wondering at the change of subject. "Oh, he's a splendid driver and I should think an all-round capable man. He seems fond of reading, too. He had a box of books waiting for him at the station."

"Had he?" said Mrs. Bellairs without enthusiasm. "But don't you think he is very handsome?" she added eagerly.

"He would not be bad-looking," said Ann, "if he had not such a sullen expression."

Mrs. Bellairs groaned as Ann moved away.

"Well, all I hope now," she said to herself, dabbing her eyes again, "is that my intuition about poor Fred is wrong for once."

The subject of her thoughts meanwhile, after having escorted Mr. Tosh to the Big House and seen the motor safely housed for the night, found himself left without any fixed occupation until it should be time for him to attend prayers. It was only seven and the prospect dismayed him.

To sit alone in the little house seemed impossible, though before his arrival there he had looked forward with eagerness to having peace to read in the evenings. He went exploring therefore in the twilight and presently found himself upon the moor—a wide heather-covered plain with rifts of sand here and there and now and again a solitary birch-tree. The woods of Bartonsmuir lay dark behind him. In front of him was the sea, pale and luminous as on the previous night, and following a little path like a sheep-track he came at last to the shore, a great stretch of yellow sand strewn with shells and fragrant with seaweed.

Here, as Ann had so often done before him, he paced to and fro for a long time in the gathering darkness, and soon the near presence of the sea soothed him into a vague yet profound restfulness. With his sore heart wonderfully at ease for the time in that great and grand companionship, he felt as men sometimes feel in the near presence of death, strangely gently alienated from all that had ever mattered to him. He was quite surprised on looking at his watch at last to find that if he were not to be late for the evening devotions he would have to hurry.

Indeed, though he did hurry he would have been reprehensibly behind time, if prayers themselves had not been belated.

As he passed the drawing-room windows, however, he heard singing still going on there. He paused to listen and the words came to him distinctly, though the voice that sang them seemed to be at a great distance.

"I was a child and she was a child in that kingdom by the sea
And we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee. . . ."

In a moment the sea-change that had soothed and comforted him was as though it had never been.

He drew back hastily from the window and hurried on till he was well out of hearing.

"He is sullen," Ann repeated to herself as from a retired corner of one of the window-seats she watched James Green from time to time during prayers that evening.

In spite of herself, she was still speculating about him. Why did he look like that? It could not be because he was sitting among the servants. He had deliberately taken the post knowing what it entailed. He must have been told all about it by Mrs. Alleyne.

No, it must be because he, too, was worrying about something or some one—that person of whom he had spoken the night before perhaps, with such strange pale face, such burning eyes.

Well, she was glad that he looked at her like that no more. Still it was unnecessary surely that he should go to the other extreme. He had at least been human the night before. That afternoon he had been merely wooden.

As Miss Caroline read steadily through the fourteenth chapter of Job, Ann reviewed in her mind the various little incidents of their expedition together and recalled the forbidding appearance of her driver's back as she had seen it through the front window of the motor. He had not spoken to her once even when they had alighted at the railway station to meet Miss Gellatly and to collect the large luggage and the small luggage, except, when she questioned him, to answer, "Yes, miss," or "No, miss."

Her cheeks burned as she remembered her friendliness to him the night before and her little jest about the maid-of-all-work.

She remembered that he had not smiled at it.

"He evidently thinks me an absolute fool," she said to herself, "and rather vulgar into the bargain."

Thus her mind was occupied with him, though she would much rather have forgotten him, and though she reminded herself again and again that what Green thought of her was of no moment to her. Already, therefore, her mental attitude towards him had undergone a change and it was to undergo yet another before the evening was over.

When Mr. Tosh, accompanied by Miss Gellatly and Ann, came out into the hall after prayers, they found Green waiting there with the author's big fur-lined coat over his arm. Mr. Tosh, however, as had been his habit with Albert, ignored his presence and went on with an argument he was having with Miss Gellatly.

It had begun before prayers when Miss Gellatly had declared her belief that all men whatsoever must have heroism in themselves since they could respond to heroism.

Then prayers had intervened, but Mr. Tosh had been thinking of his answer all the time, and the moment they rose from their knees—

"Then, madam," he said, turning to Miss Gellatly, "you would claim genius for every human being, too, since all men can respond more or less to genius."

"I do," exclaimed Miss Gellatly at once. "I believe it with all my heart. I believe it along with all the greatest teachers of the world, that there is a genius in every man ready to respond to the call of genius."

"But, my dear Miss Gellatly," said Mr. Tosh, "students of the subj——"

"I care nothing for them," cried the little old woman. "Many things are hid from the wise and prudent. The Holy Spirit, which it is the unpardonable sin to deny, is simply the soul of each of us—the genius—that's what I believe. I wish you good night, sir."

She went off and left him then, while in high dudgeon he turned to where Green was standing.

"Why the devil don't you bring me my coat?" he said, forgetting that his attendant was not Albert.

Then as Ann hovered anxiously near, fearing the effect of further ebullitions upon the new man-servant—

"Did you ever hear anything like that woman, Miss Charteris?" he said. "All these men at the front are to claim equality with Napoleon simply because they go charging their enemies as any buffaloes would."

At the word one of her sudden waves of anger swept

through Ann. Her eyes blazed as she looked at the old man shuffling himself into his fur-lined wrappings.

"Then you think, Mr. Tosh," she said, her voice trembling, "that the splendid courage of these men who are defending us is simply buffalo courage?"

"My dear Miss Charteris," said Mr. Tosh, "any scientist will tell you——"

"Then, sir," said Ann, without waiting for him to finish, "I would rather—much rather—be a buffalo than a scientist."

With that she, too, turned on her heel and left him.

"Lorimer," said Mr. Tosh as they plodded down the drive together, "take warning by me and never start arguing with women."

He said it twice on their way down the drive.

"However intelligent they may seem," he added as he reached his door-step.

Meanwhile, Ann, having escorted Miss Caroline to her apartment, was standing in the dusk of the upper landing listening to the other Wrack-straws talking as they congregated round the hall fire, and waiting till her wrath should have simmered down again before she reappeared among them.

She was burning with indignation at Mr. Tosh, and more furious still, now that she had time to think of it, with the man James Green. Not by glance or movement had he dissented from Mr. Tosh. He had only looked handsome and occupied himself with the overcoat. After all, however, it was not his place to do otherwise, not his place in more senses than one, since he was still here—out of everything—though he was evidently educated and a gentleman. He probably agreed about the buffaloes. He was a conscientious objector who preferred valeting to fighting, preferred holding fur overcoats to drawing swords.

She clenched her hands and her teeth with rage at him.

Well, she knew *now* what she thought of Green, though she had not known when Mrs. Bellairs asked her! She

simply could not stand him! She wished she had never *seen* him!

Somewhat calmed by having come to this conclusion she went slowly downstairs to her duties in the hall again.

She seemed to step from the lowest stair into an environment of peace and pleasantness. The hall was a spacious oak-panelled place. There were shaded hanging lamps there and a glorious crackling wood fire set round with luxurious easy-chairs.

Williams was lighting bedroom candles at a side-table. Sanders and Maggie were handing round refreshments. Everywhere there was clinking of tumblers and a pleasant murmur of desultory conversation.

Then Mrs. Pitmirran suddenly began to speak in her slow heavy booming voice.

"Why doesn't that young man Green enlist?" she said.

Every one stopped talking and turned to look at her, for her voice and manner gave the few remarks she made an importance out of all proportion to their value.

Pleased with the attention she had attracted she decided to make her remark again.

"I say," she said a little more loudly, "why isn't that young man Green in the trenches?"

"I must say I was wondering that too," said Mrs. Fennimore standing at the fender, a steaming tumbler in her hand, and holding an attenuated foot towards the blaze. "He looks as strong as a horse I'm sure."

"Perhaps he has a weak heart nevertheless," said Miss Emily gently but a little doubtfully.

"In one sense probably he has," said Mrs. Fennimore with a sniff. "But I should call it a *faint* heart, not a weak one, Miss Emily."

At this there was some laughter, Mrs. Pitmirran and Miss Gellatly joining in.

Then all at once, before she realised what she was about to do, Ann spoke.

"You have no right to say that, Mrs. Fennimore," she said sharply.

Her clear young voice seemed to ring through the room.

Mrs. Bellairs, who, as she afterwards declared, had been sitting on the verge of apoplexy because of the necessity for keeping her word to Fred, gave a little start of mingled surprise and relief.

"Bravo!" she exclaimed under her breath.

No one else spoke, however, till Miss Emily said quietly—

"Miss Charteris dear, I think you are forgetting yourself."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Emily," said Ann with flaming cheeks. "I did not mean to be rude, but the thought was too strong for me just then. I remembered that not one of us can ever go to fight. None of us, therefore, have the right surely to sit in judgment on any man, especially on one who is not here to defend himself."

"He is fortunate, however, in having you to speak for him," said Miss Gellatly kindly in her pleasant voice. "You are right and I was wrong, my dear. I should not have laughed at him as I did."

"And now I suppose I should rejoin by saying that I should not have spoken as I did," said Mrs. Fennimore, holding her flounced skirt a little higher than her thin ankle might also enjoy the warmth.

She paused for a reply, but no one spoke.

"But I shall not," she said then very decidedly. "Miss Charteris is quite wrong. We *have* a right to judge. We have as much right as Lloyd George or Asquith or—or—hundreds of other non-combatants."

Ann bit her lip.

"Lloyd George has sons fighting," she had almost said. "Asquith has had his eldest son killed."

But she managed to stop herself just in time.

She had done quite enough already as she saw by Miss Emily's face. It was impossible to part thus for the night.

Pale now with the effort of it she said very distinctly—

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Fennimore. I ought not to have pitted my opinion against yours."

"Oh, pray don't distress yourself, Miss Charteris," said Mrs. Fennimore. "Your opinion—strange to say—has not altered mine in the very slightest."

"And to think," said Mrs. Bellairs to herself when she was alone that night, "that I could alter it so completely that she wouldn't know it again, if I were not tied hand and foot by my silly promise. . . . But it was almost worth it," she added after reflection, "to see that fine young creature standing up for him. . . . Go on with your business," she apostrophised her absent nephew, "my name's not Maud Bellairs if it isn't all coming right yet."

It seemed far from right to Ann, however, as she stood shaking still with excitement in her own room waiting again till she had recovered herself before going to Miss Caroline's bedroom to say good night.

She was angry with Mrs. Fennimore, but she was more angry with herself.

What in all the world had made her speak like that?

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

IN WHICH TWO MORE WRACK-STRAWS ANNOUNCE THEIR
ARRIVAL INSTEAD OF ONE, AND JAMES GREEN RECEIVES
A MIDNIGHT MESSAGE

It may be remembered that one other Wrack-straw, Miss Eldershaw, had replied not altogether in the negative to Miss Caroline's invitation. Her niece had replied for her, though she herself was in no doubt as to her wishes in the matter. She wished to stay at home and not to go to Bartonsmuir at all. The niece, however, who had trained as a V.A.D. and had now a chance of going on foreign service, wished entirely otherwise. A small civil war had, therefore, been taking place within the precincts of the gloomy old Grange on the outskirts of a country town where they resided, ever since Miss Eldershaw, junior, had dispatched her first letter to Miss Barton.

The progress of the campaign might have been estimated by the notes that, like the little war-flags people stick on the map of Europe, followed each other in quick succession from the Grange to Bartonsmuir. These, however, were the only signs of conflict, for it was a *very* civil war.

The second letter arrived about a week after the first.

"DEAR MISS BARTON," it ran, "I am sorry still not to be able to say definitely when my aunt will be with you. Next week, however, I hope to let you know. In the meantime I trust that her room will not be occupied. I shall be glad to pay any sum you mention in order to keep it open for her.—Yours sincerely, ELLEN ELDERSHAW, JUNR."

After this there was no bulletin for about ten days. Then a third note came.

"DEAR MISS BARTON,—It is most kind of you to keep the room open for three weeks longer. As I have told my aunt

repeatedly it would do her all the good in the world to go to you. She herself admits this, but finds it difficult to break the habit of seclusion and solitude which she has unfortunately allowed to grow upon her. I have, however, invited a number of friends to stay with us and hope that in my next letter I shall have something definite to report.—Yours sincerely, E. ELDERSHAW, JUNR.”

Letter the fourth was short but triumphant.

“DEAR MISS BARTON,—My aunt has told me to let you know that she hopes to be with you on Tuesday next. I have not had time yet to look up trains as the house is full of visitors at present. I shall, however, send word in good time.—Yours sincerely, E. ELDERSHAW.”

Instead, however, of the final instructions the following note arrived on the Monday.

“DEAR MISS BARTON,—I am sorry to have to tell you that my aunt has decided to postpone her departure for a few days.—Yours sincerely, E. ELDERSHAW.”

A counter-attack, the nature of which will never be known, must have succeeded, however, for the next communication was from Edinburgh.

“DEAR MISS BARTON,—My aunt wishes me to inform you that she is now en route for Bartonsmuir, and hopes to be with you to-morrow by the afternoon train.”

This last note was penned in the railway carriage before the Eldershaws had actually arrived in Edinburgh. Time pressed, for Ellen the younger had arranged to join a contingent of V.A.D.'s going abroad on the third day from that date. The first thing she did, therefore, after her aunt and she were on the platform, was to speed to the station post-office. To accomplish this she had to leave her charge for a few moments to the guidance of a seedy-looking little porter, and it was then that the contretemps occurred that so nearly lost for Ellen the younger all the ground she had won with so much difficulty.

Miss Eldershaw, senior, related afterwards that the behaviour of the little porter who was attending upon her had

been strange from the first. He had had a scared and unreliable look about him which was very far from inspiring confidence. When she had told him that the three trunks and the hat-box and the two bags in the van were labelled "Miss Eldershaw, passenger to Bartonsmuir," he had stood still staring at her just as though she had been the ghost of herself. This, however, might have been passed over as a mere fault of manner or a nervous condition arising out of these distracting times. But when all at once without any apparent reason he flung down the lunch-basket and the two small bags and the roll of rugs that he was carrying and disappeared into the crowd, it was no wonder that Ellen, junior, returned to find her unhappy relative in a state bordering upon collapse. The fear of losing her luggage as well as her porter had alone prevented her from fainting away altogether. She was only able to articulate "Nothing will induce me to continue this journey," when her niece found her seated on the largest of her boxes and clutching as much as possible of the remainder of her baggage.

Ellen, junior, discreetly deaf, departed as soon as might be in search of another porter, execrating her wretched luck and the miserable little man who had been the cause of this inopportune disturbance. Even Ellen, however, had she known all, might have forgiven all. The renegade porter was none other than the ill-fated Japp who, after many vicissitudes, not one of which had anything to do with a recruiting office, had managed to acquire the uniform of a non-combatant. He had acquired besides a stubbly beard. His most intimate friend, if he had had any, would not have recognised him. He need not have been so terrified, therefore when a tall broad figure in brand new khaki came swinging down the platform.

It was this military apparition, however, with the pale, sleepy-eyed face that was the cause of his sudden decampment. The sight of Albert in uniform had completely disconcerted him, for if Albert in ordinary clothes had let him escape to serve his own ends what was to hinder Albert in

khaki, again to serve his own ends, from denouncing him? Now that he was a soldier besides, he would perhaps feel it to be his duty. His uniform perhaps had developed a conscience in him. All these considerations occurring to Japp at the same moment would have sent him flying to the uttermost ends of the station had not one in authority brought him up short half-way and demanded an explanation of his presence on the wrong platform. Doubling like a hare, therefore, he returned to the one he had left, which was now crowded to overflowing by the arrival of another train, and by the time he reached his post near the luggage van he had remembered how very unlikely it was that Albert would recognise him. He remembered too how very gratified he ought to be that Bartonsmuir now was definitely rid of Albert, and for the first time since he left the place his conscience was all but quiescent.

This unaccustomed state of mind filled him with a kind of recklessness. He looked boldly round and was almost undismayed when he saw Albert quite near him and evidently looking for some one. The old lady he himself had deserted had disappeared and had taken all her baggage with her. In the very place where he had last seen her, however, another old lady was standing.

But this one was very different to the last. Miss Eldershaw, in her heavy old-fashioned wrappings, was as unlike this elderly belle as a chrysalis is unlike a butterfly. The new-comer was a study in black and white. She had fluffy white plumes in her black bonnet. She had even white uppers to her shining black boots. She had snowy side-curls too, and the merriest of black eyes, which at the moment Japp caught sight of her were looking round inquiringly.

An instant later she moved forward suddenly and Japp found to his astonishment that Albert was her objective. Albert, however, did not see her, it seemed. He was still searching eagerly in all the carriages. He did not turn until she actually addressed him.

"Well, Bertie!" she said quietly.

Then Albert literally leapt round.

At the same moment a surge forward of the crowd pushed Japp suddenly up against him from behind, and he was struggling in a panic to get himself clear again when he heard Albert say quite distinctly—

"Do you mean to tell me that this is *you*, Jane?"

The old lady nodded, tossing her white plumes.

"*You little devil!*" said Albert.

There was no doubt about it, for he said it slowly, half incredulously, half admiringly, and the strange thing was that far from being shocked or offended at being thus addressed, the old lady seemed to like it.

So strange was this phenomenon that Japp, though he was now clear of Albert again, forgot everything else for the moment in the contemplation of it. The old lady had begun to laugh silently. Noting Japp standing staring, however, she instantly recovered herself.

"Porter," she said haughtily, "get my luggage out of the van will you? Four large trunks addressed like this suit-case."

She handed him the suit-case as she spoke.

On the label was written:

"Mrs. Dodsworth. Passenger to Bartonsmuir."

"And see you don't drop it," added Mrs. Dodsworth, sharply, for the startled Japp had all but done so. "I want everything except it put in the Left Luggage Office nearest the platform where the trains for the north start."

Thus adjured, Japp once more pulled himself together and in a few minutes he was trundling a barrow loaded with the four trunks along the platform. Behind him came the elegant Mrs. Dodsworth, chatting gaily as she leaned on the arm of Albert. Gloom, however, had again fallen upon Japp, his momentary elation had given place once more to the deepest depression; for his conscience had become rampant again and more unmanageable than ever.

Who is this woman? It kept saying to him as he edged his barrow through the crowd. Who is she?

One thing seemed clear. The old lady in black and white was a Wrack-straw about to take advantage of Miss Barton's invitation. Well, he could not help that, could he? Surely it was no business of his. Yet on his conscience went.

Did they know at Bartonsmuir that this new Wrack-straw was a friend of Albert's?

Japp dumped down his barrow with a thud.

"No, they did not know. Only he—Japp—knew. Only he knew besides what it meant for any one to be a friend of Albert's. There was no getting past that.

"This isn't the Left Luggage Office, stupid!" said Mrs. Dodsworth.

Japp spat on his hands despairingly and took up his barrow again.

"Nobody'll get to the north of Miss Charteris," he muttered for the hundredth time as he trundled onwards. This time, however, the formula did him no good. There was something uncanny about this old magpie-lady, so much so that he felt he must positively do something definite as he watched the taxi with her and Albert in it roll out of the station on its way to Princes Street.

He could not follow them out of the station just then, but he reflected that they would have to return to it. The lady at least must, since the trains for Bartonsmuir left only from this station. Examining the time-table then, he found that there was no train until the next morning.

There was ample time to send warning, therefore. But to whom should he send it?

Not to Miss Caroline. She imagined him in the trenches and was awaiting a field post card from him to tell her his address.

Yet she would be very angry should such news come first to any one else.

Still—if he telephoned—— But with the remembrance of the telephone came the remembrance of the West Lodge,

and a new thought turned him all at once cold with horror.

Was it possible that since Albert had left Bartonsmuir a new man had been engaged and was now occupying the West Lodge? And if so—had Albert removed the bombs from the dug-out?

He had promised that he would certainly, but how could one rely on the word of a man who went about with skeleton keys in his pockets? To ask for information under the circumstances was out of the question. All Japp could do was to ply his conscience with assurances that no Zeppelin would come so far north. This he did desperately, realising that if Albert had not removed the bombs, he was now in a worse position than he had ever been in. Formerly if a bomb from a Zeppelin had found the dug-out he would have been branded as a traitor, but now if a new man was installed in the West Lodge he—Japp—might yet become a tacit murderer. What sort of a life would he have with his conscience then? It would be better to be hung outright.

The little man groaned aloud.

There was such a noise, however, that no one heard him, and just then another train came in. He had no more time then even to think. One traveller after another seized upon him. The mildness of his aspect attracted people to him who had not succeeded in gaining the attention of any other porter. That evening it seemed to him that there were legions of these. Several sometimes set upon him at one time, quarrelling over him, almost tearing him to pieces among them. When he was at last free to leave the station precincts for half-an-hour he was so dazed and confused that he was incapable of reflection. Remembering the address that Albert and his old lady had given however he went up to Princes Street and stood opposite their hotel for a time in a forlorn hope of some idea there occurring to him.

But no inspiration came.

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Albert and his companion, meanwhile, quite unaware of all the perturbation they had caused, were seated comfortably tête à tête in a retired corner of the hotel drawing-room. It was a large room and almost deserted that evening. Besides themselves there were only two ladies there, and these, strange to say, were no other than the Eldershaws, senior and junior. They were sitting as far from their fellow-guests as possible, reading and talking in subdued tones. Their presence, therefore, had not interfered in the least with the vivid account of his late exploits that Albert had just been giving.

He now sat at table with a rough pen-and-ink map before him on which the Big House of Bartonsmuir, the West Lodge, and the sea-shore were all marked, and was tracing a dotted line which wavered across the moor between the two latter points. Jane all attention was watching his pencil.

Ellen Eldershaw, junior, looking furtively at them from afar, wished she could watch it too.

"He's drawing a plan of the trenches for his mother now," she said to her aunt.

"Poor creatures!" murmured Miss Eldershaw, without raising her eyes from her *Home Chat*.

"So there you are," Albert was saying, at that moment as he dabbed his pencil down on a little dot by the sea-shore. "This is a big whin-bush and underneath it is your entrance to the passage."

"One of my entrances," Jane corrected him. "There's the other by the West Lodge."

"No, no," said Albert. "That is not for you."

"Why not?" said Jane rebelliously. "I know how to move the dresser, and you said there was no danger."

"Nor is there," said Albert, "at least not the danger Japp was afraid of. These cases marked 'Explosives. Handle with caution' were all empty. If he'd had the pluck to lift them he'd have known. There's only petrol in the dug-out."

"Well, then——"

"It is impossible for you to go that way," said Albert. "There may be some one living by this time in the West Lodge. In any case it stands on the drive where any one might be passing at any time. You're not to risk it."

"Bother!" said Jane. "Then every time I want to hide something in the passage, I'm to pilgrimage across that blessed moor."

"It's not far."

"It's nearly a mile you said."

"I don't care if it's two miles."

"I dare say not," said Jane. "You haven't to carry the loot through wet heather or Highland cattle or who knows what and then scramble with it into a hole under a whin-bush——"

"You talk like a child," said Albert. "This cache that I have had the luck to find—the extraordinary luck to find—is one in a hundred, my girl. Not a soul except that little idiot Japp knows even of its existence. As for the entrance under the whin that you despise—I never saw a more perfect entrance. No one would ever dream it was there, and there is hardly ever any one near it. It would be madness not to make use of it. You can change your dress there too at the finish. You forget that this is to be a big thing."

"Oh, no, I don't Bertie," she said quickly, "and I'm jolly grateful to you, old boy, for giving me the chance of it. I'll have the time of my life."

Albert pushed back his chair.

"You needn't have said it, anyhow," he said, sulkily, "though you *are* glad to get rid of me."

"Oh, poor old boy, I forgot!" said Jane. "But you know what I *mean*, Bertie!"

"No, I'm damned if I do," said Albert. "You make a perfect fool of me. I should never have let you meddle with this, for instance."

"Then you don't think I'll manage 'em?" said Jane

indignantly. "Well, then, I'll show you! I'll bet you Mrs. Pitmirran's diamond sun I will."

She leaned towards him eagerly, her black eyes sparkling and setting alight an answering fire in his sleepy eyes.

"Do you not think I can manage them?" she urged again.

"If they are like me," he said suddenly, "you'll twirl 'em all round your little finger."

Jane edged away a little.

"What, *all*?" she laughed. "Wrack-straws and police-folk and farm-hands? For here's a farm too, I see."

And she became absorbed in the map again.

"*All* of 'em," said Albert recklessly. "Now put away the map."

"I can talk quite well while I'm looking at it," said Jane, suiting the action to the word.

"No, you can't," said Albert. "Besides, I want you to look at *me*."

"Well, none of your sentimental nonsense here, then!" said Jane. "That old lady over there is watching us. Do you see what lovely black pearls she has on?"

"No," said Albert, "I can see nothing but you to-night. You are more maddening in those white curls and things than you have ever been, you little witch."

"Come out for a walk along Princes Street, then," said Jane. "It's so dark there it won't matter if you *do* kiss me once or twice. But remember this is a special treat for your going away. I'm not one of the kissing kind."

"O Lord! Tell me something I don't know?" said Albert.

The two ladies in their far corner lowered their papers sufficiently to look after the departing couple.

"He's leaving by the midnight train," said Ellen, as the door closed after them. "The waiter told me."

"It must be very trying for his poor mother," said Miss Eldershaw.

"Yet see how she bears up," said Ellen hastily. "Did

you hear her laughing again and again while he was speaking to her?"

"Hysteria," said Miss Eldershaw gloomily. "It is distressing to hear that kind of laughter."

But at this point the anxious Ellen, to change the subject and give her aunt no time to become herself hysterical, suggested bed and escorted her to the floor above.

Here, however, fresh trouble awaited her. A favourite bag with books of devotion in it which her aunt read every night had gone a-missing and neither in their bedroom nor in the luggage-office downstairs could the distracted Ellen anywhere discover it. Miss Eldershaw fairly wept over this. No loss could have upset her more. It was to her as though the foundations of her security had been undermined both in this world and the next.

Ellen was dismayed, not so much at the loss itself, as she was sure that the bag would be found at the station, but at this second disaster occurring so soon after the first to unsettle her aunt's mind before she was on the last stage of her journey. She was furious with the porter who had been the cause of everything, furious with herself, furious with her aunt. Both ladies, however, as their custom was, remained through everything painfully polite to each other. The more annoyed Ellen grew the more affectionate she became.

"Darling," she said as she put on her hat again, "there is no need for you to distress yourself. I shall find the bag, never fear."

This, however, caused a fresh burst of tears from Miss Eldershaw. To think that her dear Ellen must go wandering about the station platforms at this time of night alone! Oh, why had they ever left the Grange? Had she not told her dear Ellen what would happen? They were not yet at Bartonsmuir, however. . . . The Grange was not yet closed altogether. . . . Some of the maids would still be there. All could be arranged. . . . They could wire to-morrow morning. . . .

At this, however, saying something so indistinctly that it might be taken to mean anything, Ellen left her.

Half-an-hour before midnight found the unhappy Japp still in a lamentable state of indecision hanging about among the other porters, watching the arrival of cabs and taxis.

He had not yet sent any message to Bartonsmuir.

"After all, poor old lady," he was arguing still with that conscience of his, "she may not know any more of Albert than I did myself at first."

Yet—came the prompt response—if she knew no more of Albert than that why did she laugh when he called her "little devil," then?

No—clearly something must be done about it.

He was still debating what that something should be when a taxi with a neat portmanteau on the top drew up in front of him, out of which to his surprise stepped Albert, handing out after him the old lady in black and white.

"Why," he heard her say, "there's that little midge of a porter again."

"I'll midge her," he murmured, "the impudent old baggage!"

Then glad to find something definite to do at last, he set himself regardless of all other business to follow these two travellers. He never left them for a moment until they were in a compartment of the midnight train. But they shut the door then and as the blinds were all closed he could see nothing from the platform. By this time, however, he was in hot pursuit and ideas one after the other were occurring to him. There was still some time before the train started. He slipped round the carriage-end to the other side where there was no platform, and in a few seconds was on the foot-board just outside the other window.

The blinds here were down too, but with his ear pressed to the glass he could hear Albert speaking quite distinctly.

"No, don't go yet," he was saying. "There's lots of

time. I came early on purpose. I want to see you once more before I go, sweetheart, without the curls and that damned bonnet."

"Well, promise not to kiss me more than once then," was the answer. "I've had enough even if you are going off. Not that I'm not very fond of you, Bertie, as you may see by my dressing myself up like a regular old guy for you."

Japp outside nearly fell off the footboard. He had just presence of mind enough left to scramble round on to the platform again, and to establish himself at a safe distance from the carriage door when it opened and Albert's "sweetheart" emerged from it. Bonnet, curls, all were as before.

"The hussy!" said Japp to himself. "The double-dyed hussy! And she would dare to call *me* names, would she?"

"Ah, so here you are," said a sharp voice at his elbow. "What did you mean, pray, by dropping our things about this afternoon and then going off and deserting us?"

It was the young lady who had been with the other old lady—the genuine old lady—whom he had left among her boxes when he saw Albert approaching for the first time.

Japp was speechless.

"And you lost one of our bags besides," the young lady went on. "You must come and find it. And don't think," she added, "that you can run off again. For you won't this time. I have my eye upon you."

Ellen, indeed, had reached the limits of her patience. If she failed to get clear to-morrow her chance of going abroad might be lost. Yet here she was near midnight seeking for this bag of her aunt's with the half-certainty that if she did not find it she would return to the hotel to hear that all the arrangements that she had had such trouble to bring about were cancelled.

No. That should never be. She would ransack the station first. She set off like an irate steam-engine with Japp meekly following her, and so absorbed was she that she did not notice that some one else was following too,

until a bland voice just behind her, which made Japp start violently, brought her to a sudden standstill.

"Excuse me," said the voice. "Have you lost a leather bag addressed 'Miss Eldershaw, Passenger to Bartonsmuir'?"

"Yes!" said Ellen breathlessly.

"Pray do not distress yourself then," said Mrs. Dodsworth, while Japp peered up at her unnoticed. "Don't distress yourself. It is in the hotel. It was taken by mistake to my room. You see the label is partly the same as mine, for I too am going to Bartonsmuir."

"Oh, thank you!" said the delighted Ellen and the two went off together talking.

"Without so much as a copper to me," commented Japp.

But when he thought the whole thing over afterwards he was forced to admit that he really had not deserved a copper.

: : : : : :

"Who is Dodsworth?" said Miss Caroline.

It was after dinner in the evening the events of which have just been related. Five minutes before a thrill of curiosity had gone round the drawing-room. Arbuthnot had brought in a telegram.

Mr. Tosh had actually made a misdeal, and every one had watched Miss Caroline covertly as she slowly opened the orange envelope and, unfolding the message with great deliberation, read it through her long-handled eye-glasses.

"Has any one any idea who Dodsworth is?" she said again after a moment.

"Never heard of him," said Mr. Tosh, beginning to deal over again.

"Nor I, nor I," said Mrs. Pitmirran and Mrs. Fennimore.

"Is there a Mr. Dodsworth communicating with us, Caroline?" said Miss Emily, dropping a card in her anxiety.

"Yes. I have just received a telegram," said Miss Caroline superfluously. "'Delighted to avail myself of offer. Hope to be with you to-morrow afternoon.—DODSWORTH.'"

"Very strange, Caroline," said Miss Emily. "It seems to be a Wrack-straw, doesn't it?"

"Yet we wrote to no one of the name of Dodsworth, did we, Miss Charteris?" said Miss Caroline.

"No," said Ann. "But perhaps," she added, "he might be a friend of some one else's, of some one who has not been able to come."

"I believe you are right, my dear," said Mrs. Bellairs. "Julia Corstorphine knew some one of the name of Dodsworth. Yes, I'm sure it was Dodsworth—a colonel's widow. And she was coming to stay at Netherton too just when we left. Julia gave that as part of her excuse for not coming here."

"Ah, then that's it, Caroline," said Miss Emily. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Tosh. I had not realised that it was my lead. Nevertheless," she added after she had played her card, "I think it rather strange of Julia not to have told us Mrs. Dodsworth was coming."

"That is of little consequence," said Miss Caroline, "when Maud here knows her."

"But I do not know her," said Mrs. Bellairs. "I have never seen her. If you like, however, I can ask her when she arrives whether——"

"Thank you, Maud. Certainly not," said Miss Caroline grandly. "We shall know at once whether she is a lady or not and that is quite sufficient."

"Nevertheless I think Julia Corstorphine should be written to," said Mrs. Bellairs.

"Certainly," said Miss Caroline. "Miss Charteris, kindly attend to that. Also give orders about the extra room. Two people will be coming to-morrow instead of one. Also tell Arbuthnot to inform the messenger that there will be no answer. Any friend of Julia Corstorphine's I am sure," she added reading the telegram again, "will be welcome here. She has doubtless regretted her own refusal to join us."

"I am certain she has," said Mrs. Bellairs. "I broke

my rule last week about never writing letters and sent a description to her of our life here which must have turned her green with envy."

"Did you indeed, Maud?" said Miss Caroline highly pleased. "Doubtless this is the cause of the coming of this seventh Wrack-straw."

"We are seven," laughed Mrs. Bellairs. "The lucky number. Don't let any more come, Caroline. Let's fill the extra rooms with our band-boxes like people do in railway carriages to keep other people out of them."

At this moment the post-bag came in and Miss Caroline's answer was delayed until all who had letters were reading them.

Mrs. Bellairs had none that evening.

"And the curious thing is that I don't mind in the least," she said to Ann who consoled with her. "That's a sign of old age I suppose."

All the same she was quite pleased when Miss Caroline addressed her and recalled her from what seemed to be a somewhat melancholy abstraction.

"There will be no need for the band-boxes, Maud, in two of these rooms anyhow," said Miss Caroline. "Two visitors are coming to occupy them."

"What? More Wrack-straws?" said Mrs. Bellairs.

"Nothing of the sort," said Miss Caroline. "They are anything but Wrack-straws, and they are well known to you and curiously enough they are well known to each other. A case of telepathy perhaps, their writing at the same time like this."

"Caroline dear, who *are* they?" said Mrs. Bellairs.

"My niece Lottie Alleyne from Rathness and Dr. Warren from Lowhampton," said Miss Caroline.

Mrs. Bellairs did not reply for a moment. She seemed transfixed. Then clapping her hands—

"My dear, I'm delighted to hear it," she exclaimed. "When are they coming?"

"When they can manage it," said Miss Caroline.

Mrs. Bellairs's face fell.

"Which will be never," she said to herself. "These busy people never *can* manage it."

And shaking her head pessimistically she fell to twiddling her rings again.

Ann was not in the drawing-room when the post-bag arrived though her conclave with Arbuthnot about the bedrooms was over. Miss Gellatly was in bed with a bad cold and had to be visited, so that Ann had not even time to read her letter from David.

The invalid, very hoarse and muffled up in shawls, lay almost lost in the midst of her great four-poster whose chintz curtains patterned all over with huge brown flowers made its occupant seem even smaller and more withered than usual.

"My dear," she croaked. "I have done a most tiresome thing."

"I know you have," said Ann. "You have lost your lovely voice. They are all very angry with you downstairs, Miss Gellatly."

"And you upstairs will be angry too," said Miss Gellatly. "I have left a book that I was reading on the stone bench at the other side of the lawn in the corner near the shrubbery—where the lilac bushes are."

"So that is where you were sitting, was it?" said Ann. "No wonder you caught a chill."

"Don't scold," said Miss Gellatly. "I was reading Stephen Phillips's *Paolo and Francesca* for the first time. Now you understand, don't you?"

"No, I don't," said Ann.

"Then you have never read it?"

"No."

"Then you shall read him before you judge me," said Miss Gellatly. "You will find him lying face downwards where I told you."

"Poor poet!" laughed Ann.

"I meant to go back after lunch," said Miss Gellatly.

"But at lunch-time you were shivering and I made you go to bed, where you have been sleeping ever since, so that it is all my fault," said Ann. "Well now I am to go and get the book. Is that it?"

"My dear, will you? I am sorry to trouble you, but there is a passage that is haunting me and I shan't sleep until I see it. Something about all the rivers. . . . What a silly old woman I am! But it's a wonderful thing as you will perhaps find some day to come upon a beautiful thing for the first time when you are quite old."

"One must be a poet oneself for that, I think," said Ann watching her.

"Or a lover," said Miss Gellatly her faded eyes bright for a moment. "Love is a wonderful revealer, child. Surely you must know that."

"Oh, of course," said Ann feeling somehow ill at ease, and as she went slowly upon her errand across the lawn Miss Gellatly's words still strangely troubled her. Was it possible, she wondered, that she who had a lover knew less of love than that lonely old woman?

Paolo and Francesca—what had her feeling for David in common with a mad passion such as theirs had been?

There was satisfaction in this thought, yet a strange sense of dissatisfaction too. Was it possible that in finding the shelter of David's love so soon she had missed for evermore wonders undreamed of?

The harbour was safe certainly, but what of the ocean outside—boundless, mysterious? What if the harbour-bar were also a prison-bar?

The thought startled her by its enormity as the first flash of lightning will startle one who has been vaguely conscious of storms brewing.

For Ann, pacing meditatively over the moonlit lawn, had been aware since the night before of something uncanny in her mental atmosphere.

She had defended the man Green unnecessarily and

vehemently just after she herself had been condemning him, and ever since, though she had avoided him as much as possible all day, the unwelcome thought of him had never left her. Her defence of him, it seemed, had had the effect of making him haunt her like the impossible frog-prince whom the princess rescued.

"Whatever did I do it for?" she asked herself for the hundredth time.

And, lo, as though in answer to the unspoken word, Green himself stepped forward out of the shadow of the lilac-bushes.

"Are you looking for a book, miss?" he said just as though he had been expecting her.

Ann replied curtly in the affirmative, burning the while with a kind of anger.

Was she never to be rid of this man? Was he going to dog her footsteps now as all day long he had been dogging her memory? Her consciousness that her anger was quite unreasonable only, of course, made it the hotter. It merely fanned the flame to remember that Green knew nothing of her defence of him and would probably, if he had been consulted, have preferred to remain undefended by her.

"Have you seen the book?" she said shortly, anxious only to end the interview.

"I have it at the lodge," he said. "May I bring it to you?"

"It will be quicker if I come and fetch it," she said.

Without another word he stood aside to let her pass before him into the narrow walk leading through the shrubbery. It was much darker there than on the lawn. High trees obstructed the moonlight, and the damp air seemed more heavily laden with the fragrance of the lilacs.

No word was spoken between the two as they went. Ann was voluntarily silent, and before they had gone ten yards poor Fred was long past speaking. For first the little breeze that was whispering among the bushes caught the end of Ann's thin scarf and flung it behind her across his lips, then

a few steps further on some overhanging blossoms stopped her suddenly and unexpectedly close against him.

It seemed to him then that he must go quite mad and tell her all, forgetting everything, and when, still in silence, they reached the gate of the West Lodge a queer kind of relief mingled with the bitterness of his regret.

Ann came to a standstill there and he went into the house to get the book.

A moment later he came out again into the bright moonlight. Ann could see him quite distinctly, and as he approached with the little volume in his hands, quite suddenly once more as on the night of their first meeting their eyes met.

Once more for the space of a breath the mute appeal in his held hers spellbound looking up at him, and as she gazed again, in spite of everything, something within her responded to him. In spite of her brief knowledge of him—all at once it seemed to her that her acquaintanceship with him was no new thing, but a renewal of some long past friendship half-remembered. In spite of reason—she was all of a sudden certain that whatever was the cause of his taking no part in the great world-conflict, it was neither cowardice nor indifference. In spite of her own judgment—the night before she had defended him unwillingly against it as well as against the Wrack-straws. Now, to her astonishment, almost to her dismay, she realised that she would defend him again because she wanted to do it.

The shock of this realisation took away her breath for a moment. Yet she made no outward sign.

The silent response in her, however, must have somehow communicated itself.

"Have you read *Paolo and Francesca*?" he ventured as he handed the book over to her.

"No," she said, and it was significant of the change in her that she no longer resented his addressing her.

"Then I envy you your first reading of it," he returned.

"But I am not going to read it," she said. "It's Miss Gellatly."

"Oh, I see," he said quietly.

But she was conscious as she said good night to him of leaving an intangible disappointment behind her, and all the way back to the house, reason with herself as she might, the awareness of this vague unhappiness remained and increased within her. Once in the narrow path through the shrubbery she actually stopped short because of a strong impulse that came to her to go back and say something comforting. Common sense, however, triumphed. "Whatever is the matter with me?" she said to herself.

This time, however, only the lilac bushes answered, whispering among themselves things mysterious and unintelligible, yet which in some occult way made her feel mean and unkind for not returning, but going steadily onwards.

Because of this she was quite glad when Miss Gellatly asked her to stay beside her till prayer-time and read the play from beginning to end aloud to her. It seemed in some inconsequent way to be a reparation.

She seated herself willingly therefore on the edge of the bed, in the shadow of the great brown-flowered curtains, while Miss Gellatly composed herself to listen with her eyes fixed on the fringe of the canopy above her.

It was as a penance that Ann had welcomed the reading. But as she read on she forgot everything except the "ancient woe" that was unfolding itself before her. And as the man Green had appeared when she had gone in quest of the book, so now from the opening page onwards he seemed to be present at this first reading that he had envied her.

But this was not all. Before she was aware of it he was in the centre of the stage. He was Paolo entering the grim hall of Rimini with Francesca "out of the sunlight." It was he who, clad in armour for the fray, paled and trembled as Francesca begged him to stay with her; he who, determined at last to die, came back to say farewell in the dawn-lit garden. Then, looking up with Francesca,

she seemed to see once more the strange questioning in his eyes that she had seen there but an hour before.

Her voice trembled a little and Miss Gellatly, withdrawing her gaze from the canopy, fixed it curiously upon her. But she had long forgotten Miss Gellatly. She read on absorbed—possessed. . . .

“And seems it strange that I should come then?”

‘No—

It seems that it could not be otherwise.

Night guided you on, and onward beckoned me. . . .

Now fades the last

Star to the east. A

Mystic breathing comes

And all the leaves once quivered

And are still. . . .

It is the first, the faint stir of the dawn.

So still it is that we might almost hear

The sigh of all the sleepers of the world

And all the rivers running to the sea. . . .’”

“That’s it,” whispered Miss Gellatly. “That’s the bit.”

But just at that moment, to the accompaniment of the creaking door opening, Arbuthnot’s voice hardly less harsh announced—

“Miss Caroline has sent me, miss, to tell ye that the gong has gone for worship.”

Ann started to her feet with a quick breath that was almost a sob.

“Ugh!” ejaculated Miss Gellatly.

She fairly wriggled among her pillows.

“Never mind,” said Ann breathlessly, “I’ll come back and finish it.”

“No, no, it’s all spoiled for to-night,” said Miss Gellatly and she turned her face gloomily to the back of the bed.

Ann did not hear her, however. She was already half-way downstairs with the book still unconsciously clasped in her hand, and thus too she entered the drawing-room with the unwelcome Arbuthnot following after her.

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"She hasn't looked at him once to-night," said Mrs. Bellairs to herself at the end of the chapter. "Not once. That might be a good sign. And he hasn't looked at her, either."

Even as she watched, however, Ann did look up and so did Fred and their eyes met for one long moment.

"Bless 'em!" said Mrs. Bellairs to herself as she adjusted her rheumatic knee to the exigencies of her devotions.

Not one word of that prayer did Ann hear. She would not have known it was over even if Mrs. Bellairs had not patted her on the shoulder. She rose in some embarrassment to find every one out of the room except that lady, who was standing smiling at her.

"You are absent-minded," said Mrs. Bellairs, "but after the good news that is natural."

"Good news?" said Ann. "What good news?"

"No. Don't tell me you haven't heard that your *fancé* is coming!" laughed Mrs. Bellairs. "Haven't you had a letter?"

With a sudden glow of remorse Ann remembered the unopened envelope in her pocket.

"Oh, of course," she said hastily and flushing scarlet. "Had Miss Caroline a letter too?"

"Yes, my young friend," said Mrs. Bellairs. "And here's a secret! She *read* hers!"

Before Ann could answer her she was gone, leaving her young friend in a state of mind only to be imagined.

After a little she followed her, but no more was said about the letter. At least Ann thought not, but afterwards she could not remember what had been said by Mrs. Bellairs or any one else that night. All she was sure of was that after her duties to everybody were over she fled to her room, opened her book at the last act, and read it to the end.

Meanwhile at the West Lodge Fred was seated at his table writing. After tearing up several he at last finished one letter which he placed in an envelope and stamped

ready for posting. It was the shortest he had written that night.

"DEAR LOTTIE" (it ran),—"Send some one to take my place at once. I must leave here immediately. Albert has enlisted and has left Bartonsmuir. There is therefore no reason why I should stay on here and every reason why I should follow him up. If you can find no one to relieve me, Piffard must. Looking forward to seeing you soon again.—Yours affectionately, FRED."

Twelve o'clock struck and still he was sitting there, hands in pockets as his custom was when in dire mental straits. His face in the lamplight looked old and drawn.

"So this is the end," he said once softly.

The little wind that had rustled the lilacs and blown Ann's scarf like a flower across his face sighed drearily round the house in answer. The dying fire crackled faintly.

Then breaking harshly into the midst of these shadow-sounds the telephone bell rang suddenly.

He started half-angrily to his feet and clutched the receiver.

"Speak here to Edinburgh!" came the peremptory order.

Then after a pause, during which he hulloed twice, three times, four times in vain to Edinburgh, a feeble little voice began.

"Is that the West Lodge?"

"Yes. Speak up, please," said Fred.

"Is that the chauffeur?"

"Yes, who are you may I ask?"

"One who wishes you well and Bartonsmuir well," said the voice. "Watch out for an old lady who is coming to-morrow. She is not what she seems to be, and she is the friend of a thief who was a valet at Bartonsmuir."

"What was his name?" said Fred, suppressing his excitement.

"Albert Figgis," said the voice, "and she's his sweetheart dressed up."

Here another voice intervened.

"Three minutes."

"Another three minutes," said Fred breathlessly. "What name is she coming under? There are two old ladies expected to-morrow."

"Eldershaw," was the answer. "Yes, I'm sure it's Eldershaw."

"And is this all you have to tell me?" said Fred. "Can't you tell me now who *you* are?"

For answer he was suddenly rung off.

"The fool!" said Fred. "We hadn't nearly finished that three minutes."

He noted the name Eldershaw and then stood reflecting.

The message must be genuine. At least the informer knew about Albert; why or how did not concern him, Fred.

All that concerned him was that now it was his duty not to desert his post. He must not go. He must stay and watch Albert's accomplice. Whatever happened. . . .

His heart leaped up from the depths.

"Hurrah!" he shouted and seizing the letter he had written to Rathness, he tossed it wildly up to the ceiling, then he deftly caught it again and shied it defiantly into the fireplace.

CHAPTER THE NINTH

IN WHICH MRS. DODSWORTH IS VERY NEARLY LATE FOR
BREAKFAST AND ANN RECEIVES A MIDNIGHT COM-
MUNICATION

FRED's letter was still burning in the fireplace at the West Lodge when at the hotel in Edinburgh Mrs. Dodsworth and Miss Eldershaw, junior, began to ascend in the lift amicably together to their bedrooms.

"Did I hear you say," said Ellen, "that you were going to Bartonsmuir, Mrs.——"

"Dodsworth, my dear," said her companion genially. "Yes, I am going to Bartonsmuir. Do you know the place?"

"No," said Ellen, "except by hearsay, but I am taking my aunt there to stay with two Miss Bartons."

Astonishment and gratification immediately irradiated the face of Mrs. Dodsworth.

"Surely not," she exclaimed, clasping her white-gloved hands, "surely not as a *Wreck-straw*, my dear young lady?"

"Yes, she is," exclaimed Ellen.

"Why so am I!" cried Mrs. Dodsworth.

"At least," said Ellen recollecting herself, "if she has not changed her mind before morning."

Mrs. Dodsworth's quick black eyes saw then that anxiety was over-shadowing the plain eager face of her companion. As the lift came to a sudden stop and they both emerged upon the landing she gave the arm nearest to her a little pat of encouragement.

"You surely don't mean to tell me," she said in a low voice, "that your aunt is regretting going? Though I can sympathise I am sure," she added with a sigh. "One does leave much—so very much behind one."

"Yes, she regrets it," said Ellen. "In fact she never wanted to come. But I—well to tell you the truth—I *made* her. I am a V.A.D., you see, and I do so want to go abroad just now."

"Ah! I understand that, too," sighed Mrs. Dodsworth. "If I had been but thirty years younger!"

"But tell your aunt from me," she went on, "to accept old age gracefully, my dear. Tell her from me, that it is the only possible thing to do, especially in these fearful times. We old people must efface ourselves. It is all we can do. We must efface ourselves."

"But it's no use telling her that," said Ellen despondently, "when she is in one of her retrograde moods. And the worst of it is that I am sure she would be perfectly happy if once she were at Bartonsmuir. But I must not keep you, Mrs. ——"

"Dodsworth," said Jane more genially than ever. "My dear, you are not keeping me. I am very interested. But come now and get your bag and afterwards, when your aunt has gone to bed, come again and tell me how she finds herself."

Half-an-hour later Mrs. Dodsworth, in a lilac satin dress ing-gown with slippers to match, heard the knock for which she had been waiting.

"Come in," she said cheerfully as Ellen appeared. "Well, how is Miss Eldershaw now?"

"Rather worse," said Ellen gloomily. "She talks definitely of returning home now."

"Yet you are sure that once right away she would not be unhappy?"

"Certain."

"Then sit down and listen to me, my dear," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "There is only one thing for you to do."

She drew her low chair close to Ellen's and talked to her earnestly for about five minutes.

"Oh, I couldn't," said Ellen then.

"Well, my dear, that's not for me to say," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "Of course if you'd rather not——"

"But I would," said Ellen. "I would very much rather."

Mrs. Dodsworth resumed then for about five minutes.

"It is really very kind of you," said Ellen when she paused for breath.

"Not at all, my dear," said Mrs. Dodsworth benignly. "The benefit will all be on my side I assure you."

What passed between the two after that was all mere matter of detail and need not be recorded here. Suffice it to say that next morning, on inquiry, Miss Eldershaw was informed by the Belgian refugee chambermaid that mademoiselle her niece had already descended.

Descending herself then, in the expectation of finding Ellen at breakfast and prepared to be *very* affectionate to her in consequence, Miss Eldershaw entered the breakfast-room with a haughty step to find to her dismay that there was no Ellen there either. Traces of the absentee were still to be seen on the table, however. A haddock-bone lay on a plate beside a half-empty cup of coffee, and Miss Eldershaw was standing gazing in a dazed manner at these relics when the hysterical old lady of the night before advanced upon her from one of the other tables.

"Excuse me, madam," said the stranger, "but are you Miss Eldershaw of The Grange, Market Leighton?"

"I am," said Miss Eldershaw frigidly.

"Then allow me to introduce myself," said the stranger. "I am Mrs. Dodsworth, of Dodsworth, in Hampshire."

"Oh, indeed?" said Miss Eldershaw icily. "I am afraid that I have not the pleasure——"

"In these times," said Mrs. Dodsworth, "one makes acquaintance with total strangers in a few minutes."

"Does one?" said Miss Eldershaw discouragingly.

"I do, at least," said Mrs. Dodsworth with engaging candour. "Your niece and I, for instance——"

"Where is my niece?" said Miss Eldershaw sharply.

"I am sorry, Miss Eldershaw," said Mrs. Dodsworth, "to

have to inform you that your niece left Edinburgh this morning."

"Left Edinburgh?" exclaimed Miss Eldershaw, clutching the back of a chair for support. "Left?" she repeated, gazing incredulously at her informant.

"She was wired for late last night to join a contingent of V.A.D.'s who had been ordered suddenly to Serbia," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "She was in a dreadful state about it. She nearly fainted outright at the thought of having to leave you, Miss Eldershaw."

"Poor girl," said Miss Eldershaw sarcastically. "And poorer people she is to nurse," she added.

"Ah, you are severe!" said Mrs. Dodsworth smiling. "But those V.A.D.'s *will* be V.A.D.'s! There were none in *our* young days, Miss Eldershaw."

"I should think not, indeed. The girls then had more sense," said Ellen's aunt.

"It's these high schools you know," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "Hot-beds for suffragettes."

"I remember the war of eighteen-seventy quite well," said Miss Eldershaw, warming to her subject. "There was no nonsense then about all the girls going off and nursing."

"Of course not," said Mrs. Dodsworth.

"They minded their own business then," continued Miss Eldershaw. "They attended to the comfort of their relations and left all that nursing to experts."

"Of course they did," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "That's just what I told my niece last week when she insisted upon going off to Salonika."

"Ah! you have suffered from it too!"

"Suffered!" exclaimed Mrs. Dodsworth, raising hands and eyes to heaven. "You will not believe it, Miss Eldershaw, but I am homeless at this moment because of my niece. I have been forced to shut up my house in Hampshire, to dismiss my maid, my chef, my five house-servants, and my chauffeur, and to go unattended and stay at a house belonging to people of the name of Barton."

"What name did you say?" said Miss Eldershaw sharply.

"Barton," repeated Mrs. Dodsworth.

"Then," said Miss Eldershaw, "I have to bring to your notice a very remarkable coincidence, Mrs. Dodsworth. I, too, have left my home and am on my way to stay with people of the name of Barton."

"Is this possible?" said Mrs. Dodsworth.

Then suddenly she dabbed her eyes once more.

"Pardon me," she said brokenly, "but it is such a relief to hear that I am to have at least *one* congenial companion in my exile."

"Well, as a matter of fact——" began Miss Eldershaw. "I am not altogether sure——"

"Dear Miss Eldershaw," Mrs. Dodsworth interrupted her smoothly, "I see that my breakfast is ready. Afterwards I hope you will give me the pleasure of your company in my cab to the railway station."

"And what could I do?" said Miss Eldershaw when she was describing the affair afterwards. "She never gave me another chance to speak. Just as I was making up my mind to cross the room and say I was not going, she disappeared upstairs and sent a maid to say that I had better be quick. Besides, too, I really wanted to come then, as without Ellen to manage the servants it would have been unendurable at The Grange. I was between two fires. I was like a wretched German private. To go forward was bad, but to go back was much worse. Besides, she was very companionable and entertaining in her own way, and apparently in the same box as myself. So the end of it all was that I just ordered down my luggage and put on my bonnet and my dolman and went."

"It's easy to be seen which it is," said Fred to himself at once, when some hours later he watched the two descend from the train at Bartonsmuir railway station. "The black and white one is much too young-looking to be dis-

guised, and the other one's Early Victorian get-up *must* be a fancy dress."

Miss Eldershaw, indeed, was more Wrack-straw-like than any of the company already assembled at Bartonsmuir. She was shrivelled with cold in spite of her endless wrappings and she was doubled up with stiffness and weariness. She leaned heavily on the arm of her companion and the more she did so the more Fred suspected her. He was so absorbed in watching her slow advance that he did not notice, as he otherwise must have done, the other old lady's start of recognition. He only observed that the other old lady was very smart and that it was she who gave the orders while the Early Victorian seemed comatose and to move mechanically wherever her fellow-traveller led her.

"If this *is* Miss Eldershaw, it's decidedly clever," said Fred to himself as he almost lifted her into the motor. "If I didn't know better I should say she was about ninety."

"Yes, m'm," he said aloud to the other old lady who was already seated. "Seven boxes and two hat-boxes and three hand-bags. Yes, m'm, I understand."

"Well, it's more than I do," said the lady addressed after he had gone again. "What in the name of mystery is Mr. Lorimer here for?"

"Eh?" said Miss Eldershaw, rousing herself unexpectedly. "What are you saying about lorries?"

"I was only wondering if we would require one to bring on our luggage, dear Miss Eldershaw," said Mrs. Dods-worth.

All the way to the house she sat staring at the driver, thinking out the problem of why he was there and of how his presence might affect her, and wonderfully soon the shock of meeting him wore off and her quick mind had begun adapting itself. By the time they reached their destination she was reviewing the situation with calmness.

"It cannot be because of Bert that he is here," she reflected. "He can only have arrived after Bert left. Otherwise Bert would have warned me. Even if he had

come on account of Bert, however, that can make no difference to me, because it is impossible that he can have the faintest idea who I am. . . . What then can he be here for?"

Again she racked and re-racked her brains and the more she thought the more extraordinary Fred's presence at Bartonsmuir and the position he had evidently assumed appeared. In amazement she saw him handing down luggage at the door and being spoken to on terms of equality by Arbuthnot.

This was only momentary, however. She had other things to do than to stand gazing at a young aristocrat posing as a motor-man. She had to answer Miss Caroline's welcome both for herself and her benumbed companion, and presently seated in a comfortable chair by the drawing-room fire she was taking a preliminary reconnaissance.

The prospect pleased her very well. There was an air of unobtrusive wealth about all the Wrack-straws. They wore rich jewels as though they had had them on from their cradles, as though they had become part of them, and were quite a matter of course. As one old lady after another was introduced to her she referred to the mental notes of them with which Albert had provided her. "Mrs. Pitmirran—that's the one who wears my diamond sun in the evenings," she said to herself. "Mrs. Bellairs—rings. Mrs. Fennimore—sapphires. . . ." And so on.

All the while she was saying charming suitable nothings to these persons.

"She will be quite an acquisition, Emily," said Miss Caroline when Mrs. Dodsworth had left the room escorting Miss Eldershaw and being escorted in her turn by Ann.

"Yes—and she is a bridge-player, too, I am glad to hear," said Mrs. Fennimore. "For really," she added in a lowered voice to Mrs. Pitmirran, "Miss Emily is an *atrocious* bridge-player."

Miss Emily was only too thankful that evening to give up her seat at the card-table. Bridge had been one of the

chief trials of the wrack-straw dispensation to her. Without the least jealousy she sat viewing from afar the triumphant début of Mrs. Dodsworth as Mrs. Fennimore's partner. The evening passed, as Mr. Tosh said, like a pleasant whiff, though Miss Gellatly was still too hoarse to sing even one ballad.

Miss Eldershaw enjoyed herself, as she confided to Ann, more than she had done since her niece had taken to V.A.D.-ing. Ann for her part after two hours spent with her charge at draughts was not surprised at the niece's defection.

She was conscious at the same time, however, that she was not doing her own part well that night. The bewilderment of the night before was still upon her. She was absent and distraite and answered at random several times.

"The companion is not on a par with the rest of the establishment," was Miss Eldershaw's verdict when her new friend came in to say good night to her.

"Why, she is one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen!" cried Mrs. Dodsworth.

"Well, perhaps," admitted Miss Eldershaw. "But I have never considered looks to be of any consequence."

"Thank heaven for that mercy!" thought Mrs. Dodsworth as she regarded her travelling-companion for the first time sans teeth and head-gear.

A few moments later she was seated by a cosy fire in her own room attired already in her boudoir cap and her quilted lilac dressing-gown. Her lilac-slipped feet reposed comfortably on the fender. In her hand as a stage-property she held the evening volume of *Daily Light*. The text at the top of the page, however, had happened to occur in Miss Caroline's reading for that evening and seeing it again made her mind revert to the scene at the family devotions, and more particularly to the mysterious Lorimer.

There he had sat quite composed between Arbuthnot and the upper housemaid. Nobody but herself had the least idea apparently that up till a few days before he had been an honoured guest at The Gables.

"What is he doing it for?" she asked herself again, and once more the thought began to trouble her. "I shall lose my nerve if I keep going on like this. He'll spoil my luck whatever he is here for."

She was sitting in deep thought looking older than she had yet looked when a light tap at the door started her.

Then all at once as she prepared to answer it a new idea occurred to her.

"Come in," she said pleasantly, and as she expected Ann came in.

"Oh, thank you, no!" she said with a genial smile in answer to Ann's question as to whether she needed help. "I find it quite amusing being without a maid for a time. Later on probably the novelty will wear off. But—don't go yet, Miss Charteris," she added, "there is one thing I should like to know. Where did you get that extraordinarily good-looking chauffeur from?"

"A niece of Miss Barton's recommended him," said Ann quietly, though her heart to her dismay began beating so thickly that it nearly suffocated her.

"Is it not strange," Mrs. Dodsworth went on, shading her face from the fire with her Daily Light, "that a young man like him should take such a post just now?"

"He doubtless has his reasons," said Ann, longing to be free to go before the hot flush she felt beginning to rise in her cheeks could be noted by the keen black eyes scrutinising her.

"Of course," said Mrs. Dodsworth with a short little laugh. "But in these times one is apt to wonder *what* such a man's reasons *are* for being a motor-man on this east coast especially."

"What do you mean?" said Ann sharply.

"I mean what I mean," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "In these times we cannot be too careful."

"But Miss Barton's niece recommended him," said Ann, feeling suddenly cold.

"Such things have happened before," said Mrs. Dods-

worth. "They say the trusted governess of one of our highest officials was arrested for espionage. I would not for the world make dispeace anywhere, but I felt I would like—since we are so many unprotected women and you seem to be in charge of us all—to put you on your guard, Miss Charteris."

"You are very kind," said Ann with white lips.

Her flush had died away as suddenly as it came. She felt frozen now, but keen as steel all the same.

"You are very kind," she repeated after a moment, "but—forgive me—I am perfectly certain you are mistaken. Mr.—Green could have nothing to do with such a thing as espionage."

Mrs. Dodsworth was hard put to it not to laugh at this.

"The name almost did for me," she wrote to Albert afterwards.

Her face, however, remained perfectly grave.

"Oh, in that case," she said, "my mind should be quite at rest. In any case, Miss Charteris, I have warned you. In your place of course I would say—when in doubt discard at once. Get any one rather than Mr.—Green to fill the post. It is quite an easy one, is it not?"

Ann hoped that the black eyes did not see her trembling.

"You are very kind," she managed to say again. "I shall speak to the Miss Bartons about—what you have said. But I must ask you to say no more to any one else about the matter."

"I shall not think of doing so," said Mrs. Dodsworth.

"Because it won't be necessary," she added to herself when Ann had gone. "The two old things will be scared to death at the idea and remove him quietly on the chance of his being a spy without saying why and without hurting anybody's feelings."

Then sitting there still by her cosy fire, she fell to wondering again what young Lorimer was really here for, and all at once the face of Ann fell into place in the puzzle-picture.

She slapped her forehead with the *Daily Light* as she realised her own obtuseness.

"It's this young beauty he's here for I do declare," she said to herself with great relief and satisfaction. "His people don't think her good enough or something and he's here courting her on the quiet. And so it's all for nothing I've been frightened!"

After a pause for reflection she added—

"Well, he's better out of here anyway."

A moment later she smiled broadly at the fire.

"I must tell Bert, he'll laugh," she soliloquised. "To think of me, Jane, being frightened of a silly lover! If I had been one of the kissing kind I would have thought of that first. But I'm not that, thank heaven."

With this she betook herself to slumber.

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Ann went straight from Mrs. Dodsworth's room to Miss Emily's.

To her she entered very pale.

"What is it, Miss Charteris? Oh, what is it?" said Miss Emily sitting up in bed.

Ann handed her her Shetland shawl.

"Something I must tell you, Miss Emily," she said, "and consult you about. I'm so sorry it can't wait till morning."

"Go on, Miss Charteris dear," said Miss Emily with forced composure.

"Mrs. Dodsworth has just been warning me that—Green may be a German spy," said Ann hoarsely.

"What did you say, Miss Charteris dear?" said Miss Emily, as though not believing her ears.

Ann repeated her words.

"But Lottie sent him," said Miss Emily as Ann had done.

"Mrs. Dodsworth says——" Ann went on. Then she told the story of the governess.

"This is fearful," said Miss Emily. "What do you

think, Miss Charteris dear? Do you believe what she says about Green?"

"I don't believe one word of it," said Ann at once.

"Then nor do I—nor do I," said Miss Emily.

"All the same——" she paused.

"We do not know him very well, do we, Miss Charteris dear?" she added doubtfully.

"I would stake anything that he is a gentleman and not a sneak," said Ann with blazing eyes.

"But," she added after a moment, "if you wish him sent away, I had better go now and tell Miss Caroline.

At this Miss Emily almost leapt upon her bed.

"My dear," she said, "you would never think of telling Caroline about it?"

"I must if he is to be dismissed," said Ann. "You know I must."

"Yes, of course—of course," said Miss Emily distractedly.

"Oh, dear me, this is a dreadful war! If only the need for spies was over!"

"Then you think he *is* a spy!" said Ann.

"No, my dear, no," said Miss Emily hastily. "But it is a dreadful responsibility."

"Then let me take it," said Ann eagerly. "Let us take it together, Miss Emily. If Miss Caroline knows nothing she cannot be held responsible, and I swear to you that the moment I see cause for suspicion I shall immediately let you know of it."

"Miss Charteris dear," said Miss Emily. "I call that really clever of you to remember that what Caroline does not know of she is not responsible for. And it shows that you are quite clever enough to keep watch as you suggest. In any case, I think, my dear, that I would have been inclined to take the risk, for, as you say, Green may not be a spy at all, and Caroline would think her whole plan had failed if there were even rumours of anything going wrong about it."

With this "not proven" verdict Ann had to be content.

But it was with a heavy heart that she tucked in Miss Emily again and blew out her candle for her. Nothing is so insidious as suspicion and in spite of herself this vote of censure upon the man Green affected as with a blight her whole remembrance of him. Not because it mattered to her, she kept assuring herself. She of course had nothing to do with the man Green. It was the sense of the responsibility she had taken upon herself—for Miss Caroline's sake—only for Miss Caroline's sake.

Nevertheless, when at last she reached her room, all her duties done for that night, the load of doubt had grown to an intolerable weight—an insufferable torment that she must deal with and that at once. There was only one thing to be done, therefore. It was half-past eleven, but without giving herself time to think she put on a hat and rain-coat, then her boots and even her gloves. Some vague idea was in her mind that she was going as an official to a business interview and therefore must be suitably dressed for it. At last, however, she was ready, and opening her bedroom door very quietly she felt her way along the passage. Without a sound she slipped downstairs. Not a board creaked. Then hastening through the hall and crossing the darkened drawing-room she opened one of the windows there and a moment later was on the shrubbery path.

Fred was in the midst of a letter to The Gables and was at the moment engaged on an entertaining description of his duties as valet when his pen was arrested in the middle of a word by the unexpected sound of some one knocking. He jumped up at once to open the door, but even when he saw the dim figure in the moonlight he had no idea who it was. His feelings therefore may be more easily imagined than described when the one voice in the world that he longed to hear came out of the darkness.

"May I speak to you for a moment?" said Ann—faintly—breathlessly, but Ann undoubtedly.

"Certainly," he said in as ordinary a voice as he could, holding the door open for her to enter.

When she came forward into the lamplight he saw that she was very pale.

"Won't you sit down?" he said, turning his chair round for her.

"Oh, no, thank you," she said, "I can only stay for a moment."

"I hope there is nothing wrong up at the house?" he said wondering as he noticed how she was dressed. She had not run for him in a panic, it seemed. Besides, she might have telephoned.

"I hope there is nothing wrong," he repeated.

"Oh, no," she said, pulling herself together. "I am sure there is not. But that new Mrs. Dodsworth has been suggesting that you were a German spy because—because you had taken this post and I felt I had to come and ask you at once about it."

At any other time Fred would have laughed aloud, not so much at the suspicion attaching to him as at the naïveté of this questioning. But at that moment he had no thought of laughter as the girl's faith in him revealed itself unconsciously. Far more was involved than the mere answer to her question. The answer to another problem was bound up with it with which all day his mind had been trying to grapple.

Something in Ann's face the night before when she had come down to prayers with the *Paolo and Francesca* in her hand had been calling to him ever since to leap the barrier that divided them, to cut the bonds asunder that bound her to that other man, to take what might very soon be his, regardless of honour or dishonour.

But now since she had come to him thus, like a child, trusting him, that other question too was settled at once and for ever. It made him hot to think that he could ever have contemplated the possibility of dragging her down with him to lower levels.

"Miss Charteris," he said thickly, "I thank you for coming to me. Will you take my word for it now that, so

help me, God, I would never do anything you would think unworthy."

There was no need for her to speak. Her eyes gleamed her answer. Her whole face glowed in response to his assurance. But he gave her no time to reply in words. Turning from her, he opened the door again.

"That is all we need say, is it not?" he said.

"Except that I thank you, too," she said. "Oh, I *do* thank you."

Halfway up the drive she remembered that she had not said good night. A strange depression was upon her as she climbed the stairs again and went along the passage to her room. Yet all her anxiety was gone. There would be no need for her to keep watch. She was quite certain of the truth of what the man Green had said to her. Nothing after this could shake her faith, whatever any Mrs. Dodsworth whispered. He would do nothing she would think unworthy and that was all that needed to be said between them. That was all, and she should have been satisfied. But, strange to say, she was more unsatisfied than ever. While he had been speaking to her she had been curiously happy. It had been again as though she had known him always—known he would speak as he had spoken. But though she ought to have known too that now he had said everything that was necessary it had seemed to her when he shut the door after her to be shutting her out again from all that concerned him.

Well—she reasoned with herself—since she was nothing to him, since he was nothing to her—what if he *had* shut her out? But was he really nothing to her then—this man whom she seemed to have known somehow from the beginning of things?

She sat down then and there to think this out and as she pondered all at once revelation came to her—not logically as it might have come to Miss Caroline, but suddenly, mysteriously.

"So *that's* what it is?" she whispered.

Then she sat silent in a strange amazement.

Hour after hour she sat there very still, until the dawn came stealing in at the window and birds began to twitter softly and then call to each other in the shrubberies. At last, however, when footsteps began to be heard about the house, she rose and going over to her writing-table sat down there and drew some note-paper towards her.

Then taking up the first pen—

"Dear David," she wrote rapidly. "You said that if I was ever ill or wanted you very badly I was to let you know. I am not ill, but I do want you now very badly. If you can manage it at all do come before you go away. Do come. Your——"

Here she paused for a long time thinking. Then she finished in a great hurry, "your own little Ann."

After she had stamped and addressed this letter she went out at once to post it.

Coming back she was surprised—for it was still very early—to meet Mrs. Dodsworth on the lawn.

"Doctor's orders, my dear," said that lady in answer to the astonishment upon Ann's face. "I hate exercising before breakfast, but I simply have to. I'm one of those people who are simply slaves to their doctors. Mine will worry me into my grave some day. Take warning by me and be a Christian Scientist."

"I wished to tell you, Mrs. Dodsworth," said Ann, "that I spoke to Miss Emily Barton last night about the matter you discussed with me, and that she agrees with me that there is no need for anxiety about it."

She expected remonstrance or annoyance or sullenness, but Mrs. Dodsworth only beamed at her from under the brim of her garden-bonnet.

"In that case," she said, "of course I am satisfied. And will you both forgive me for being so interfering and officious?"

Ann could scarcely believe her ears. Really people were

incomprehensible! You agonised to please them and then you found that after all they were quite indifferent.

"You meant it for the best I have no doubt," she said coldly as she turned away from the smiling lady towards the house.

"Poor thing! She has made herself quite pale and plain over it," said Mrs. Dodsworth as she sauntered on towards the shrubbery.

A moment later, however, she had forgotten Ann and resumed the train of thought which the meeting had interrupted.

For now that Jane was actually at Bartonsmuir she was eager to get to work and that for several reasons.

Miss Corstorphine would be written to—had perhaps been already written to—and though she knew—for she herself was her secretary, now supposed to be on holiday—that she never answered any letters if she could help it and seldom even read them, one could never be quite certain.

Then, too, it was the first time that Albert had ever allowed her to work alone and she was eager to distinguish herself. She had wagered him the diamond sun that she would, and she was determined that she would win that wager. She recognised, for with all her admiration for Albert's cleverness she knew his weaknesses, that it was not his high opinion of her capability but simply and solely his greed of gain that had overcome his caution on this occasion. It was no wonder, however, she reflected, that he had given in to her entreaties and sent her instead of him on this adventure.

"It's as easy as Aladdin's cave," she said to herself. "It's too easy. Any fool could do it."

The only thing that worried her was Albert's precautionary arrangement.

"Confound that underground passage!" she said more than once as she paced along between the rhododendrons.

It was characteristic of her respectful attitude towards Albert's experience, however, that never for one single

moment did she think of dispensing with the services of the passage.

"If it weren't for the moor," she added after more cogitation. "But the moor part will be simply beastly."

She turned a corner just then to find herself unexpectedly on the drive and facing her a little grey house all overgrown with greenery.

She knew it for the West Lodge at once. Albert's description had been minute and accurate, and as she was looking at it deep in thought Fred came out in a great hurry and went off buttoning his motor-coat. Presently the motor driven by him and with Arbuthnot on the other front seat passed her and disappeared through the pillared gateway.

Still Jane stood staring at the lodge.

"And the very door's left open!" she said to herself presently. "I must have a look anyway before I go plunging on the moor in these clothes and crawling under whin-bushes."

She looked round her then and up the drive. Not a soul was in sight. No sound of any human being was to be heard.

"How like a man to think of such a plan!" she said.

Then she stepped lightly across the roadway.

A moment later she was in the lodge and here she paused for a moment hesitating.

"I must see for myself anyhow," she muttered as she approached the dresser, and unscrewing one of the drawer-handles she pressed a spring underneath. Instantly the great dresser rolled out from the wall smoothly and silently on well-oiled castors, and a moment after she was looking down awe-struck into the dark square hole which had been below it. A ladder descended from it into unknown depths. A box of matches and a candle stood beside it on the bracket. Without giving herself time to think she lit the light and holding it very carefully so that no spots of grease should fall on her dress she climbed quickly down the ladder. Then setting down her candle she climbed up

again and found two handles at the back of the dresser by which she easily pulled it back into its place.

A moment later she stood once more upon the sandy floor at the bottom of the dug-out. All around her were walls built up of petrol tins. The candle light everywhere shone on smooth surfaces. Then holding her light lower she saw the fateful packing cases and laughed as she read the inscription—"Explosives. To be handled with the utmost caution."

At the same moment as she looked round, however, she noticed a gap of darkness in the wall of petrol tins.

Her black eyes glittered as they fell upon it and setting down her light again she tucked up her heavy skirts. Then pulling her bonnet straight on her head and giving her white curls a shake and resuming her light—

"Now for it!" she said to herself.

A moment later she was in the passage.

She stepped at first gingerly forward. Soon, however, she was hurrying on as fast as possible.

"Will it never end?" she muttered once or twice. The sand-walls at times seemed to be closing in upon her.

At last, however, to her great relief, for she was breathless partly with nervousness and partly with plunging through the soft sand, she saw the sand-wall right in front of her.

"The turning!" she exclaimed. "The whin-bush should be near now."

Sure enough round the corner there was light and fragrance, and a faint rushing sound which had been in her ears for some time grew suddenly loud and distinct.

"The sea!" she cried and ran on sniffing delightedly.

A moment afterwards she was peering out at the dunes and the waves beyond them through a golden glory of whin-blossom.

There was no time to linger, however, or to admire scenery. As she hurried back along the passage she realised with great satisfaction that already she felt quite at home

in it. Nothing now would induce her to go round by the moor and get soaked and draggled and chased by Highland cattle perhaps.

"Here it's dry anyhow, and it's a short cut," she said to herself, "and as for stuffiness—it's no worse than some of old Julia's passages. . . ."

There was a certain delight, too, in setting aside Albert's commands for once.

"So long as I use his precious *cache* it's no business of his how I get to it," she reflected.

By the time she reached the lodge again she was in great feather. Mr. Lorimer had not yet returned. Everything was plain sailing. The only delay was caused by the thick powdering of sand with which as soon as she reached the daylight she found she was besprinkled from her bonnet downwards. To reappear like this was impossible. After the first shock, however, she calmed herself. It was dry loose sand. Two minutes with a clothes-brush was all she needed. And there *was* Mr. Lorimer's clothes-brush. The door was already locked. Quick as thought she whipped off her bonnet. Her white curls came with it, her hair came down, and it was only after this had happened that she noticed that she had forgotten in her hurry to lower the window-blind.

"Not that it matters in this god-forsaken place," she said to herself as she repaired the omission. She took care, however, to draw it up again before she left the lodge spick and span as she had entered it after a wonderfully brief toilet.

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Two hours later she was sitting at a little desk in the morning-room where the Wrack-straws were wont to congregate after breakfast. Mr. Tosh had just left them to go to his literary labours. Miss Caroline in gardening gloves and a large sun-bonnet had passed through the room on her way to superintend planting. Miss Emily and Ann had

retired to discuss domestic matters and their voices could be heard as a discreet murmur from the dining-room.

There remained only Mrs. Bellairs, who was reading the papers and announcing items of news from time to time, Mrs. Pitmirran and Mrs. Fennimore, who in the intervals of the reading were describing to each other their bridge-hands of the previous evening, and Miss Gellatly, enveloped in a large shawl seated very close to the fire, deep in a new volume of Masfield.

"DEAR BERT," wrote Mrs. Dodsworth after gazing pensively at her companions one after another for a time—"I am glad to hear that you've got a safe job, but sorry that you should be worrying about me. Please don't. You have no idea how well I am getting on. I am quite a favourite already and on terms of intimacy with at least one Wrack-straw. This is Miss Eldershaw, an old woman who travelled with me here—you saw her, too, she is the lady who was in the hotel drawing-room with the glorious black pearl ear-rings. I intend to make a start almost at once with her. On the Block System. The Silence Game. Oh, never fear! I'll have them all accomplices!

"As for the *cache*. I agree with you now I have seen it. You were right about it as you always are. The whin-bush is in bloom by the way, and smells absolutely delicious.

"Well, good-bye. I'll write soon again. To Port Said, isn't it?—Yours, JANE.

"P.S.—Of course I'll marry you when you come back if you still wish it, but don't you think in our line it is more convenient to be just engaged?

"P.S.—Now, dear old boy, don't go worrying whatever you do. If you could only see me now sitting here in the middle of them all you would know for certain how easy it is going to be."

"If I haven't forgotten to tell him about Mr. Lorimer being here!" she said to herself as she finished addressing the letter. "But probably he would only worry about that too, so perhaps it is just as well."

"Miss Charteris," said Mrs. Bellairs, as Ann entered just then, "I was to remind you of something, but I have forgotten what it was."

"Oh, yes, thank you," said Ann. "I was to write to Miss Corstorphine. I'll do it now as soon as Mrs. Dodsworth has finished."

She spoke in a low voice, not so low, however, but that Mrs. Dodsworth heard it and went on writing until Ann was called away to something else.

"So long as no letter goes, there can be no answer," said Mrs. Dodsworth to herself.

And no letter went that day for it was only when it was very late that Ann remembered again about it.

"Bother!" she said. "I haven't written to Miss Corstorphine yet."

She was in the morning-room again when she said it, having stayed up after the others had gone to bed to revise accounts for Miss Emily who, as she herself said, was no arithmetician. When the remembrance came to her she was sitting at the desk, and drawing paper and envelopes towards her she was in the act of selecting a pen when she heard some one tapping.

"Come in," she said wondering which of the servants wanted to see her after midnight, and to her surprise Arbuthnot came in. She was still fully dressed and had a strange expression on her face.

"Is anything wrong, Arbuthnot?" said Ann turning in her chair.

"I don't know, miss," said Arbuthnot, "and I don't want to trouble Miss Caroline or Miss Emily either, if I can help it, but I saw a strange young woman this morning in Green's cottage—in the West Lodge—and I feel it might not be right to keep it to myself, miss."

Every vestige of colour left Ann's face, and for a moment she neither moved nor spoke. Her voice was quite steady, nevertheless, when she answered—

"A young woman? Are you sure, Arbuthnot?"

"Certain," said Arbuthnot. "I'll tell you how it was, miss. I went down early to Mrs. Bisset's at the farm to get some eggs for the breakfast, miss, for we were short, and all the others was busy at the time. I got a lift from Green when he went down with the motor."

"Yes," said Ann faintly.

"Well, miss, I was on my way back and just passing the West Lodge again when, to my surprise, I saw the door was shut for I had seen it wide open when I passed in the motor and had given Green a hearing about leaving it like that in case of tramps and so on. Well it was shut, but I have always kept myself from mixin' in other folks' affairs when I could, so thinks I it's none of my business anyway and past I goes, but something made me look back, miss, and there in the window I saw a young woman with black hair that was pulling down the blind as if the place belonged to her."

"Could you not have imagined it?" said Ann after a moment. "Some trick of shadows——"

"Shadows canna pull down blinds," said Arbuthnot. "It's been tormentin' me all day what I should do about it. I made up my mind first not to say a word to anybody, but I couldna go to my bed holdin' my tongue altogether."

A bright enough colour was in Ann's cheeks now.

"You were right to come and tell me, Arbuthnot," she said. "But now that you have done so you need not say any more about the matter. It is in my hands and it is now my business to deal with it."

"Very well, miss. Thank you, miss," said Arbuthnot, and relieved of responsibility she mounted her attic stair.

"For though she's but a young body she's mair sense than mony a auld ane," she added to herself later as she put on her night-cap.

Meanwhile the self-appointed warden of Bartonsmuir sat facing towards the door until it had closed behind the old

woman. Then turning to the desk again she folded her arms upon it, laid her face down upon them, and wept long and bitterly.

She quite forgot all about the letter to Miss Corstorphine. The only one who remembered it was Mrs. Dodsworth.

"I wonder if the lovely Ann has written to old Julia yet," she soliloquised as she popped the extinguisher on her candle.

CHAPTER THE TENTH

IN WHICH MISS ELDERSHAW ATTRACTS MORE ATTENTION
THAN SHE HAS EVER DONE BEFORE IN THE WHOLE
COURSE OF HER LIFE

LAUGHTER is said to have a healing influence, but in some cases nothing restores the soul like tears. It was the first time Ann had wept since love had befallen her, and after an hour or so of it she felt so much better that she actually went upstairs to bed. There she found herself so sleepy after her vigil of the night before, and so worn out by the confusion of emotions through which she had passed since, that hardly had her head touched the pillow than she was in a sleep so deep that she was beyond the reach even of dreaming.

In the grey of the morning she awoke, however, and lying still and straight with her hands clasped behind her head and forcing back the tears the while she faced the new world which had opened up before her.

There was no good grizzling of course. That was her first thought. What had happened to her had happened to lots of people before and would happen till the world ended. While Francesca was with Paolo in the garden Giovanni da Rimini was loving her and longing for her. It was a mere chance if things came right. The wonder was that they ever came right at all. No—there was no good grizzling. As her father would have said she must adapt herself. But still the hot tears came and came—dash them away as she would, and yet the keenest sting about it all was that she had not even the right to weep. She had not even a right to complain, to fight for her lost love like Giovanni. He had never been hers this man. He had always been that other woman's. It was because of some resemblance in her

to the other woman that he had paled when he first saw her and trembled in her presence. Who was she? Who was this other woman? How long had she been at the West Lodge? Had she been there in that inner room perhaps on the night before when she had come there on her business interview? Had she been listening while he was speaking to her—reassuring her? The flame of her anger leaped up once more, but after a moment it died down again. After all what had he done? She—Ann—had sought him out there and had put a question to him which he had answered honestly—yes—she was sure—honestly. With a little thrill she remembered how he had asked her to take his word for it that he would not do anything she would think unworthy. If he had not spoken truly to her, then nothing was true, nothing in all the world. She could never believe that he had lied to her. She had taken his word for it then and she held to it now, in spite of everything—in spite of everything. After all surely to know love at all was a great thing—even love as hopeless as hers—as useless.

No—not useless—for it could stand by him through thick and thin, though unknown, though unrecognised.

Again a saying of her father's occurred to her.

"Visible communication has failed," she quoted under her breath, "but the invisible can hold strong and steadfast."

It was a bracing thought, chill but invigorating like an east wind, and it gave her energy to sit up in bed and to think of rising to the occasion again and dressing.

As she sat there with her hands clasping her knees, however, she heard the sound of some one digging steadily in the garden below her window. Leaning forward and pulling aside her curtain a little she looked out. And then all in a moment the high brave thoughts went by the board leaving only the realisation that he was there quite near yet whole worlds away from her.

Fred, all unaware of what Arbuthnot had seen at the West Lodge and indeed that there had been anything to

be seen there, had yet that night been unable to sleep and was glad as soon as daylight gave him an excuse to get to work.

There was plenty to do. Miss Caroline in a casual manner, which had obliged him to conceal a smile at the time, had ordered him to dig up all the lawn between the shrubbery and the rose-garden. When he had ventured to suggest that only half of it would be needed for the medicinal plants which had come the day before, she had said perhaps, but the other half could be filled with vegetables. In Germany they had every inch of ground cultivated—even the window-boxes—and she was thinking of having the other lawn dug up too.

"Well, thank goodness I'm accustomed to it!" said the man from the trenches as he shouldered his spade and set out that morning. And there he was with his shirt-sleeves rolled up hard at it when Ann looked out.

The scent of the wet earth came up to her watching him as the young Marpessa might have watched her mortal lover in his first strength and beauty turning over the soil for her. And something of the young Marpessa's thoughts stirred in the depths of her soul as she looked on—thoughts of life and love on the low earth, of shared joys and sorrows, dawns and sunsets, till a great wave of despair and regret overwhelmed her and dressing hastily she escaped from the house.

On the moor she grew calmer, but even the sea that day had no power to soothe, and what alone pulled her together in time was the fear of her tear-stained face being remarked upon.

Not to appear at breakfast was, of course, impossible. She had a hundred and one duties to perform.

"And the one thing you can do now, Ann Charteris," she said to herself, "is to keep yourself *to* yourself and look as little like an owl as possible."

She flattered herself that the wind had effaced all traces of what had been and it was with a measure of confidence

therefore that she took her place among the Wrack-straws. Hardly had she done so, however, when Miss Emily fixed her little anxious eyes upon her.

"Miss Charteris dear, you are colded," she said.

"I hope it is not influenza," said Mrs. Fennimore, who was sitting next to her, and both she and Mrs. Pitmirran, who was sitting on her other side, withdrew themselves a little from her.

"Bed perhaps would be advisable," said Miss Caroline, regarding her through her long-handled eye-glasses, "though I always have thought," she added, "that except in cases of severe illness it is relaxing."

"And there's absolutely no severe illness about Miss Charteris," broke in Mrs. Bellairs. "She's just been out in the east wind. I get like that too. It's unbecoming, but it's nothing to worry about. Bring me some of whatever that is on the sideboard, my dear. It smells good. And then go to Miss Gellatly. I dared her to get up this morning, but she'll be down if some one doesn't go to her for she has finished every book and magazine she has up there, she says."

Fred's labours afforded a spectacle that morning not only to Ann, but to all the Wrack-straws. When he had finishing valeting Mr. Tosh even that gentleman with his manuscript on the eve of completion came and stood watching for the space of a whole cigar. As for the others, they clustered round, whispering among themselves that whatever he was *not*, Green *was* a good digger. Even Miss Eldershaw, more fallen together than he had yet seen her, appeared towards noon in a bath-chair which to his indignation was propelled by Ann.

"The impudent fraud!" he muttered under his breath, and cut an unoffending worm in two pieces.

Miss Eldershaw, however, all unconscious of the emotions she was arousing, stayed anchored in her bath-chair near him till Arbuthnot came to wheel her in to luncheon.

Whenever he looked up there she was still watching him with dreamy placidity between perfunctory glances at her *Home Chat*.

Now and again she was even moved to encourage him.

"You are getting on, Green, aren't you?" she would say in her high cracked voice. And Fred in his irritation at being addressed by her had much ado at times not to send a turf flying in her direction.

His hostility, however, was lost upon Miss Eldershaw. She enjoyed her morning thoroughly and after a good lunch—the open air having made her sleepy—she betook herself to her own apartment. It was a drowsy afternoon, and she was soon on her sofa snoring gently, her head in a shawl and supported on a large soft cushion. She was dreaming that she was back at the Grange and that all the servants had given notice, leaving her absolutely solitary with a party of people coming to dinner. The first guest had already arrived before she had begun to set the table even and her voice was resounding through the house.

"Miss Eldershaw! Miss Eldershaw!"

In a panic she started up on her sofa. The voice, however, was no dream. It belonged to Mrs. Dodsworth, who was standing looking at her.

"I am so sorry to rouse you," she said. "But I am in great trouble, Miss Eldershaw, and, short as our acquaintance has been, I feel that you are the only one to whom I can confide a secret here."

"A secret?" exclaimed Miss Eldershaw, warming a little towards the speaker.

Since they had arrived she had been feeling neglected by her travelling-companion. Her new friend seemed now to be always surrounded by other people. She had been inclined to receive her coldly. This appeal, however, made her forget these past negligences for the moment.

"What is it?" she said, as Mrs. Dodsworth still hesitated.

"Sh-h!" said Mrs. Dodsworth, finger on lip, looking round at the closed door behind her,

Miss Eldershaw, quite wide-awake now, slid her feet off the sofa and sat up. Then she hitched herself along a little towards her visitor.

"Did you notice the emerald and diamond pendant I was wearing last night?" said Mrs. Dodsworth, in a low voice.

"Certainly," said Miss Eldershaw. "You drew my attention to it, I remember. The one that was given to your great-grandmother by Napoleon. The heirloom."

"The heirloom," repeated Mrs. Dodsworth. "Well, it's gone, Miss Eldershaw."

"Gone?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean lost?"

Mrs. Dodsworth nodded. She could indeed not have confronted her voice just then. It was hard enough to confront the old lady's blank dismay with a straight face.

"But this is very serious," exclaimed Miss Eldershaw. "You should have a search made immediately, Mrs. Dodsworth."

"My dear lady," said Mrs. Dodsworth, very impressively, "I have been doing nothing else but search for it except at meal-times since this morning."

"But this is terrible!" exclaimed Miss Eldershaw, clutching mechanically at a large amethyst she was wearing. "And have none of the servants seen it?"

"Sh-h!" said Mrs. Dodsworth sharply. "Excuse me, Miss Eldershaw, but I am so afraid of any one listening. You see—I am distressed to bring even a shadow of suspicion upon this household—but after all, Miss Eldershaw, what do we know of these people? As I said to my niece at the time she was urging me to come here, What *do* we know of them?"

"I have known the Bartons, or rather known *of* them, since my childhood," said Miss Eldershaw, drawing herself up.

"My dear Miss Eldershaw, you mistake me," said Mrs.

Dodsworth hastily. "I was not referring to the Miss Bartons or any other friend of my dear Jane Corstorphine's. But surely you must admit that we are at present rather an unprotected little community and in a manner in charge of a very young and inexperienced person."

"You mean Miss Charteris?" said Miss Eldershaw. "Well—as I said on the first night——"

"Yes, you saw it at once," said Mrs. Dodsworth, "and besides her there is merely a company of servants and not one man among them nearer than the farm."

"You forget Green the chauffeur," put in Miss Eldershaw. "He——"

"I am not forgetting Green," said Mrs. Dodsworth significantly. "Oh dear, no—I am not forgetting Green!"

The tone was unmistakable.

"You surely do not mean to say——" began Miss Eldershaw, aghast.

"I don't want to say anything," said Mrs. Dodsworth, "but I cannot help *thinking*—and what I think leaves me far from satisfied."

"About Green?"

"About Green. He is a young man for the post he is occupying. And just now on this east coast one is always suspicious."

"And you actually think——"

"I am afraid to say what I think," said Mrs. Dodsworth, shaking her head, "but what is in my mind has made me come to the conclusion that in order to lay hands on my pendant again one thing is absolutely essential, and that is silence."

"*Silence?*" exclaimed Miss Eldershaw.

"Dead silence," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "The pendant has been stolen without a doubt."

"Are you *certain?*" said Miss Eldershaw, beginning to tremble very much.

"Certain!" said Mrs. Dodsworth. "I remember quite distinctly putting it in its case last night. I am most

particular in such matters. It was in its case. I remember distinctly closing it for it has a troublesome clasp. I had some trouble making it fast. Well, this morning when I was dressing I noticed that it was open. I could hardly believe my eyes. But there it was. And on examining it I found it empty also. Now what more proof do I require? I can think of no other solution."

Miss Eldershaw was rocking herself to and fro by this time.

"Oh, this is terrible, this is terrible," she ejaculated. "If I had known I was to be mixed up in such things I would never have come here. But it is not too late," she interrupted herself, suddenly stiffening with resolve. "I shall pack up this very minute."

But at this Mrs. Dodsworth gave a little shriek of horror. "And leave me here in trouble after I have confided in you?" she said incredulously. "Leave me alone to track down the criminal? Surely never!"

"But what can I do?" said poor Miss Eldershaw, wringing her hands. "I was eighty-three on my last birthday. I am not fit to track down criminals."

"My dear Miss Eldershaw," said Mrs. Dodsworth, "I am not asking you to do anything except—surely it is not much—to keep silence in the meantime."

"In the meantime—in the meantime," said Miss Eldershaw distractedly, "but how long will that be?"

"Only a few days, I am convinced," said Mrs. Dodsworth.

"And that's the truth, anyhow," she added to herself. "If all of them are going to kick up such a dust the sooner this house sees the back of me the better."

She was retiring towards the door as she thus soliloquised.

"Very well, very well," said Miss Eldershaw, wiping her eyes. "If you assure me——"

"I am certain of it," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "If we are only silent. *Silent!*" she repeated impressively. Then she vanished, closing the door behind her.

Miss Eldershaw remained seated rigidly on the sofa, too unnerved at first from the shock she had received to think connectedly on any subject. From the turmoil of her mind, however, the thought presently emerged that if she remained silent she might implicate the Miss Bartons whose guest she was in some disreputable transaction. Mrs. Dodsworth's suggestion that she did not know the people of the house well had startled the old lady in a manner of which the spurious Mrs. Dodsworth had no suspicion. It had shaken her confidence all at once in that clever person and made her, in a strong revulsion of feeling, inclined to take the part of her two kindly hostesses. Any guest in her own house, she reflected, who concealed from her the loss of jewellery on her premises would be wanting in respect to her.

Feeble and stupid she was certainly, but she had not been so many long years the mistress of a great old house for nothing. Her breeding took the place of brains in this crisis and made her feel instinctively that it was wrong to be silent.

Thus Jane, astute as she was, had made a false step at the very beginning of her enterprise in choosing Miss Eldershaw for her first accomplice. The old lady had had no concealments in her own life because she had never had anything to conceal, and the mere fact of having to hide that with which her mind was fully occupied made her exceedingly uncomfortable. So much so that after a time she felt it to be absolutely necessary, in spite of what Mrs. Dodsworth had said, to take some one into her confidence. Had her solicitor or her doctor been available she would have consulted one of them. She had quarrelled with her clergyman, but she would have gladly summoned even him. As she thought of them, however, she felt worse than she had yet done, for the clergyman and the doctor were in France and the solicitor in Mesopotamia. At the same time the urgency of the need to unburden herself at once seemed to increase from moment to moment. But to whom

should she go? To whom? Who would be competent to advise her?

With the thought of competence, however, another idea came to her, for competence, in her opinion, was exclusively a male attribute. There was one man besides Green at Bartonsmuir—Mr. Tosh. From her corner of the drawing-room she had looked approvingly on him, on his old-fashioned courtesies, on his air of a man of the world. She had even heard him read aloud part of his book, and though she had not understood a word of it she had heard Miss Caroline praise it highly. He was, moreover, a great friend of Miss Caroline's. He certainly, whatever other people might do, would never tolerate any disrespect to her or any conduct which might injure the reputation of the house whose head she was. On him she—Ellen Eldershaw—might then confidently rely. She made up her mind, therefore, to go and consult Mr. Tosh.

Galvanised into immediate action by the thought that in an hour or so her career of duplicity might have to begin at afternoon tea, she hastened to the great mahogany wardrobe, took therefrom her outdoor attire, and presently stood tying the ribbons of her sealskin hood firmly under her receding chin and looking, in spite of a trembling which she could not altogether control, a wonderfully determined old figure.

Mr. Tosh had that afternoon reached the last chapter of his book. The plan of it was already drafted. All that was left for him to do was simply to write it out. There were five sections, A, B, C, D, and E, and he was well on into the middle of B when with great annoyance he heard a persistent tapping at the outer door of his lodge.

He had counted upon having an absolutely clear afternoon, free from interruption of any kind. He had disposed himself and his manuscripts accordingly. It will be remembered that his book, originally entitled "*The Utter Impossibility of a War with Germany*," had had to be

adjusted to circumstances from beginning to end, and not the least annoying and irritating part of this trying task was this last chapter in which had been the climax of the argument.

No wonder then that the floor round Mr. Tosh's writing-table was bestrewn with torn papers which the author from time to time had cast from him. No wonder that his rather long white hair was rumpled, his collar torn open, his dressing-gown unfastened. His eyes had been fixed in an agony of composition on the ceiling, and his mind labouring to transform one of his former thoughts into one more compatible with recent happenings, when the knocking rendered everything futile.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed at last with pardonable exasperation.

He said it softly, however, and no one heard it, least of all Miss Eldershaw on the doorstep. She was, therefore, totally unprepared for the door being violently flung open and a red-faced apparition with white tousled hair and an ink-bespattered dressing-gown appearing on the threshold.

If Miss Eldershaw was dumbfounded, however, Mr. Tosh was no less so. Had the hall clock at the Big House come to pay him an afternoon call he would have been no more astonished than at the sight of this particular Wrackstraw. He had never once before since her arrival at Bartonsmuir seen Miss Eldershaw erect and unsupported. He had always met her either being wheeled about in a bath-chair or leaning heavily on the arm of somebody. Never either had he observed the distracted expression as of a trapped rabbit in her small and peering eyes. She was a singularly plain old woman he reflected, but evidently in need of some assistance.

"You wished to speak to me, Miss Eldershaw," he said by way of a cue, for he had no idea, as he told Fred afterwards, of spending the whole blessed afternoon upon the doorstep.

For answer the old lady, as though she had stopped

because she had run down and was now wound up again, began once more to walk and, passing Mr. Tosh, was in the centre of his room before he could utter another word, her black silk skirt trailing among his papers. Then as though mechanically she took the chair he had been sitting on and said suddenly in a queer choked voice—

"There's thieving going on."

"Eh?" said Mr. Tosh.

"Thieving," repeated Miss Eldershaw.

Mr. Tosh took another chair.

"By Jove!" he said to himself. "Can this be Lorimer's and Piffard's affair?"

His annoyance about being interrupted was gone. After all, that last chapter could wait. This old woman was, for the moment, more important. For the first time he regarded her with genuine interest. He drew his chair a little closer and then, as his eyes searched her face for some explanation, she nodded.

"Yes, it's a bad business," she said, "and I felt I must tell somebody."

"Tell me more," said Mr. Tosh.

"It was Mrs. Dodsworth who told me," said Miss Eldershaw. "Her diamond and emerald pendant is missing—the one Napoleon gave to her great-grandmother—and she is sure she put it in its case last night."

At this Mr. Tosh seemed to be about to whistle. No sound, however, escaped from him until at last after what seemed a long time—

"Go on," he said abruptly.

"And she came and told me a little ago," continued Miss Eldershaw, "and told me not to tell anybody, but I felt that to keep silence altogether would not—would not be respectful to Miss Barton. . . . So—so—as my lawyer is in Mesopotamia and my doctor and my clergyman in France," added poor Miss Eldershaw, wiping away a tear, "I came to see you, sir, about it and to ask your advice."

Here she all of a sudden became voiceless.

"My dear Miss Eldershaw," said Mr. Tosh, "don't distress yourself." He sat then, however, staring at her with a strange expression on his face and without offering a single word of further counsel. He behaved quite differently to any of her former advisers, quite differently to what she had expected. Never since the beginning of the war had she felt so utterly bereft and miserable. At last after what seemed to her an age but was really about one minute she could bear it no longer.

"What am I to do?" she burst out.

At this, still without answering, Mr. Tosh rose and began pacing up and down the little apartment, and as he did so he looked so sensible and, in spite of his *déshabille*, such a man of the world still, that her confidence in him revived a little.

"I shall do whatever you think best, Mr. Tosh," she said, putting her handkerchief back into her reticule.

"Then, my dear Miss Eldershaw," he replied, wheeling round and bending towards her in a confidential and impressive manner.

"I say—keep quiet about it. Silence. That is what I advise. Silence."

"What?" said Miss Eldershaw, hardly believing her ears. "You advise the same as she does?"

"The very same," said Mr. Tosh.

"You are sure that you are right in keeping what has happened from Miss Barton?"

"Perfectly sure. To speak now might be to let the thief slip through our fingers. And I would strongly advise you to keep your visit here secret from Mrs. Dodsworth also."

"This is terrible," said Miss Eldershaw faintly.

"I will take the responsibility," said Mr. Tosh, smiling reassuringly. "It will likely only be for a few days."

Poor Miss Eldershaw was but little reassured, nevertheless.

She shook her head as she looked at Mr. Tosh. He seemed suddenly altogether unreliable with his rumpled hair and

his ink-bespattered draperies. Oh, for the business-like deportment of Mr. Straker her lawyer, the good sense of Dr. Turner, the benignity of Canon Fuller!

"This war will be the death of me," she said aloud with apparent irrelevance.

Then rising with a certain tragic dignity, she added—

"I need not detain you longer, sir."

Quarter of an hour later, leaning heavily on her stick, she entered the Big House unobserved and regained her room feeling more than she had ever done since she had left The Grange, Market Leighton, indeed a Wrack-straw.

No one noticed her state of mind, however. Miss Eldershaw was not one of those people who ever are noticed by anybody very much. Her appearance that evening so far as her outer garments went, even to the black pearls, was just as usual. As no one happened to speak to her that evening no one noticed that she was as dumb as the chair she sat on. Mr. Tosh entering the dining-room a little late met her peering eyes fixed on him and nodded reassuringly again. But the length of the table was between them and he had nothing besides to say to her at that moment. When she refused to play draughts afterwards Ann was only relieved, as she felt that evening even more repugnance to the game than she generally had. So there sat Miss Eldershaw bunched up in a remote arm-chair, brooding drearily over the situation and holding a *Home Chat* upside down in front of her. Her slow mind was toiling away with the problem of how far it was necessary for her to keep the injunction of silence for the second time laid upon her by Mr. Tosh. With regard to the latter part of this she had no doubt. She had no desire to tell Mrs. Dodsworth of her independent action. She imagined that lady in a rage or coldly contemptuous and the idea of it completely scared her. No—she would say nothing to Mrs. Dodsworth. . . . As to the theft itself, however, that was another matter. In spite of what Mr. Tosh had said she could not persuade

herself that it was honourable to hide what had happened from Miss Caroline. Here, however, her fear of what would be thought of her if she divulged the secret paralysed her. Miss Caroline would of course raise a hue and cry immediately. Every one would know then that it was she—Ellen Eldershaw—who had given the alarm. Mr. Tosh would know—Mrs. Dodsworth—all those other people.

No, to tell Miss Caroline under the circumstances was out of the question. . . . Indeed, to tell any one. . . . There was only one way out and that was to get herself removed from Bartonsmuir as soon as possible. Ellen her niece must act. She must come home at once and take her back to The Grange again, where she would be secure and safe. From there as from a port of refuge she might send word to Miss Caroline that untoward things were taking place beneath her roof. Once at The Grange she might do anything. Her own old house—servants or no servants—seemed a haven of delight. The very thought of it caused more than once a heavy tear to splash down behind the *Home Chat* upon her satin lap.

Mrs. Dodsworth meanwhile, after vainly trying to catch the eye of her unwilling accomplice, placed herself with her back to her at the bridge-table. She had taken care, however, to have a mirror facing her and was thus able to keep watch. By this means she saw that the old lady received a letter when the post-bag was brought in and that after reading it she had revived somewhat. Then presently she became aware that she, leaning on the arm of Ann, was being conducted from the drawing-room. She did not reappear and after a little Ann returned.

"Is Miss Eldershaw not coming down again?" said Mrs. Dodsworth.

"No," said Ann, "she is tired and has gone to bed. I don't think she is very well to-night. She is not looking like herself."

"Your deal, Mrs. Fennimore," said Mr. Tosh, but his eyes wandered speculatively to the corner where Miss

Eldershaw had been sitting and dwelt for a moment on the empty chair and the discarded *Home Chat* before they returned to the hand that had been dealt him. He too was unusually silent that night. A strange oppression seemed to brood over the drawing-room. Miss Gellatly after singing one song, and that of a doleful nature, had immersed herself in a new book and refused to sing another note. Miss Emily was busy with accounts at a far-off desk and was apparently beset with great difficulties which at times obliged her to lay down her pen altogether and tick items off with her right hand upon her left-hand fingers. Miss Caroline herself, though she was corporeally in the midst of her guests, was mentally totally absent from them as she had been entirely absorbed since dinner planning out her new herb-garden. She had a large sheet of paper before her on the round table where the rose-shaded lamp was, and was sometimes bent so closely over it that her pearl-tassels all but touched it. Ever and anon she would lean back in her chair regarding the cornice fixedly.

"As though," Mrs. Bellairs said, "she saw daturas growing on it. And if it were not such an entertainment to watch Caroline excogitating an idea," she added to Ann, "she really at times would be very dull company."

Mrs. Bellairs herself was as usual doing nothing at all.

"I acquire merit best, you see," she explained, "by simply admiring everybody. Miss Gellatly has been reading theosophy to me, and thoughts are real things. They do any amount of good. I find theosophy a *great* comfort."

She sat therefore twiddling her rings on her idle fingers and watching Ann, who, glad to be freed from the boredom of draughts with Miss Eldershaw for that night at least, was hard at work on a muffler.

"She is pale," said Mrs. Bellairs to herself, "and she has dark shadows under her eyes. No wonder with such a confusion in her love affairs. . . . Heaven send a climax soon one way or the other! . . . One thing I am certain of,

when things do straighten out I shall at once tell Fred frankly what I think of him. . . . Masquerading here, masquerading there! . . . No other aunt of a V.C. would stand it. . . . While as for his keeping the thing a secret that he is apparently thinking he is hiding—if these old fossils were not all as blind as bats they would see as plainly how it is with him as though he went down on his knees to her in front of them.”

All the Wrack-straws that night except perhaps Mrs. Fennimore and Mrs. Pitmirran, whom bridge—even as played by Mrs. Dodsworth and Mr. Tosh that night—made absolutely immune from boredom, were glad when ten o'clock struck and the rest of the household filed in for the evening devotions.

Mr. Tosh since the afternoon had been bursting with the news of Miss Eldershaw's extraordinary visit. He had had no opportunity of speaking to Fred since. Even his comfort had been sacrificed to the new herb-garden for Fred, having been sent off for more plants by Miss Caroline, had not appeared as usual in his character of valet.

During prayers therefore the old gentleman mystified and rather scandalised his colleague by facial contortions meant to convey to him that he had tidings. His deportment hitherto had always been so correct at prayers that this departure from it was quite electrifying. Mr. Tosh's behaviour was after all of no importance in Fred's mind, however, as compared with the question as to whether he could escape from him afterwards. For it had been disclosed to him by Maggie when they were cleaning out the greenhouse together that every night at that hour, rain or fair, frost or thaw, Ann made the round of the house to see that no lights were showing.

For several nights now he had given himself the doubtful pleasure of accompanying his lady-love unseen by her on these expeditions. As soon as he could therefore he escaped from the house in case Mr. Tosh should seize upon him. He always went to the East Lodge later to see the old man safe

for the night and had several times had to remain for hours there while Mr. Tosh, sitting up in bed, read portions of his book aloud to him.

Ann on this particular night made him belated, however, though she was all unconscious of the transgression. She was indeed aware of little else but her own thoughts and of her gladness to be out in the fragrant silence. The warm, heavy atmosphere of the drawing-room combined with the mental storms she had passed through had made her head ache. She was too tired for grief or for anything but a dull melancholy. Would it always be like this, she wondered? All in this life, all beyond, so vague, so empty, while long spring days, spring nights like this, made for two who loved each other, were passing . . . passing. . . .

Ann, it will be seen, was in no very exalted mood, but to Fred in the shadows watching her she seemed as though she were already a saint, as far removed as the Blessed Damosel from his wild desires and passionate longings. Something of her thoughts, however, must have reached him by mysterious ways, for never had he so longed to speak to her and tell her whatever happened how he loved her.

It was only after Ann had finally disappeared for the night that he so much as remembered Mr. Tosh. With haste then, however, for it was long past his usual hour, he made his way to the East Lodge. The door was ajar when he reached it, which was unusual, but a streak of light showing through the aperture seemed to indicate an inhabitant. No human being was within, however, no night-capped author manuscript in hand, and the only occupant lay regarding him with no curiosity and little interest.

"Well, Walter!" said Fred to him nevertheless. "How do you find yourself? And where does your master find himself?"

But Walter returned ne'er an answer except to settle himself more comfortably among the manuscripts.

"You'll be knocking that candlestick over, you know," said Fred, snatching away the light as it wavered above

the papers. "You'll be like what's-his-name and Carlyle's *French Revolution*, if you don't look out, you old sybarite."

With that he set the candle on the mantelpiece and left the East Lodge to return to the Big House where he found Arbuthnot on the watch for him with a telephone message from Mr. Tosh demanding his immediate presence at the West Lodge.

Mr. Tosh was by this time in a frenzy of impatience. He had poked the fire so often that it was roaring up the chimney, and whenever Fred came in, without even waiting for him to sit down, he launched his adventure of the afternoon at him. Immediately, however, Fred was as much excited as he was, though his excitement showed merely in a tightening of the lips.

"I could hardly believe my eyes," exclaimed Mr. Tosh, "when I saw her walking about alone like that, Lorimer."

"That need not have surprised you," said Fred. "I have information about this Miss Eldershaw. She is no more Miss Eldershaw than you or I, Mr. Tosh. This afternoon visit of hers was pure comedy from first to last. She is really Albert's sweetheart——"

Mr. Tosh here sat down as though Fred had just bowled him over.

"What?" he said faintly. "Say that again, Lorimer."

"Ah, I had forgotten," said Fred. "You do not know that Albert is the man we're after."

"Albert!" whispered Mr. Tosh, voiceless with astonishment.

"The time has now come, I think," said Fred, laughing a little at his bewilderment, "to post you up, colleague. Your information lags behind events."

Then he gave him a full account of the stealing of the emerald rings at the canteen, of the plan of pursuit arranged at the Gables, of his determination to leave Bartonsmuir in order to follow up the trail elsewhere until his reception of the telephone message from some one unknown at the dead of night had changed his plans again.

"I don't know and can't think," he added, "who sent that message. But I think it is genuine. It sounded to me, too, as though the man, whoever he was, knew much more than he told.

"But *Albert*——" exclaimed Mr. Tosh again.

Then rage overtook him.

"The miserable scoundrell!" he cried, banging his fist with such force on the table that every bit of crockery in the room rattled. "The wretched——" he paused, searching for some word to express his feelings, "the wretched—*Hohenzollern!*" he shouted, "to bring disgrace upon me and through me perhaps upon this house here. . . ."

"Not that at least," said Fred grimly. "We'll catch her. Never fear."

"*Him* you mean?"

"No, he's slipped through our fingers. I mean the sweetheart," said Fred.

"Though he were twenty times enlisted he shall be caught!" cried Mr. Tosh.

"Very well, sir, but in the meantime we have our work cut out here," said Fred. "That disguise as Miss Eldershaw is a really clever piece of acting, and the coming to you for advice is simply a stroke of genius. Only an expert would have thought of that. It will take the two of us working all we know, sir. You must do the bombing out and I'll be ready to cut her off."

"I bomb her out?" said Mr. Tosh, with less enthusiasm. "Really, Lorimer——"

"I don't mean literally of course," laughed Fred. "But now let's light up Watson and put our heads together."

They made out a plan then for taking turns at watching—Mr. Tosh in the day-time, Fred during the night—marking down everything in the most business-like manner and then Fred made two copies, one for the East, one for the West Lodge. They made a night of it smoking and planning by the fire which ever and anon Fred replenished from a great heap of pine logs. It was between three and four in the

morning when he escorted his colleague back to his own quarters.

Here all was desolation. The candle on the mantelpiece had burned down and gone out leaving behind it a nauseating odour of hot grease. Walter, however, was still luxuriating on the writing-table.

"What's the difference, Lorimer, between Walter here and the candle?" said Mr. Tosh, who was in great form by this time. "Nothing ever puts him out."

"Capital!" said Fred as he fitted a new candle into the candlestick.

"Nevertheless," he added, "Walter might put *you* out some time, sir, if he tipped over the candlestick among your papers."

"Oh, but he'll never do that," said Mr. Tosh confidently as he began divesting himself of his necktie. "I never by any chance leave a light of any kind upon my writing-table."

"To-night you did, sir," said Fred.

"Did I, indeed, Lorimer?" exclaimed Mr. Tosh, with much concern. "Upon my word this detective business is playing the very deuce with me."

It played the very deuce, too, with Fred's repose that night, for another hour or so had slipped away before his colleague was at last disposed of.

The kettle had to be boiled, Horlick's had to be prepared, amendments to the final plans of action had to be discussed at length, and Walter had to be accommodated with a bowl of bread and milk before the valet was at liberty to make his exit.

"If it isn't almost time for the digging again!" he soliloquised, glancing at his watch as he took the shortest way to his own lodging. "If that old crock they wanted for this post had taken it, he would have been on the verge of a break-down by this time."

His way led him along the drive close past the Big House which, majestically indifferent to the disaster threatening

its reputation, was still sunk in slumber behind its closed yellow blinds.

Not altogether, however, for just as he was approaching, it, Maggie emerged from a small side-door.

She grinned widely when she saw him. Fred grinned in response, for he delighted in Maggie. She was a between-maid in the fullest sense of the word. She was always doing what no one else wanted to do, and had done so, she informed him, all the thirty years she had been at Bartons-muir. She was always working at whatever hour of the day he saw her, yet always cheerful, always imperturbably good-natured. Her mouth was too large and her nose was too small, but in spite of those and her many other deficiencies of face and figure she was to Fred, at least, always good to look at.

"Well, Maggie," he said as she approached beaming all over, "you are an early bird this morning surely."

"Not as early as I ought to ha' been," returned Maggie. "This letter should ha' gone last night by rights. But I'm that scared o' the dark roads that I could not bring myself to them. It'll make no difference though for the post goes out they say at eight."

"At eight?" laughed Fred. "Then you're in good time. I hear the stable-clock striking five just now."

"Well, ye see," Maggie explained, "I want to be back in time so as Miss Eldershaw 'll not know that it's jist gone the now." With that she went on her genial way while Fred, too, went on home to breakfast.

"It's fortunate for us that it's the sweetheart and not Albert himself we have to deal with," he reflected. "Catch Albert giving a letter at night to poor old Maggie to post!"

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

IN WHICH MISS CAROLINE IS FORCED TO EVOLVE
ANOTHER IDEA

MR. TOSH had left the hall immediately after prayers the night before and his example had been followed by most of the other Wrack-straws. There seemed less disposition than usual to linger by the fire, and about twenty minutes after the departure of Mr. Tosh only Mrs. Fennimore and Mrs. Dodsworth were left to enjoy it. Miss Caroline, with her herb-garden plan still unfinished, had retired with it in her hand to her own apartment. Miss Gellatly, too, had withdrawn to hers with *The New Bernhardt* and a glass of boiling water. Mrs. Pitmirran and Mrs. Bellairs were finishing off a friendly argument on the upper landing. Miss Emily and Ann were nowhere to be seen. The coast was clear in more senses than one, for Ann had written that morning to Miss Corstorphine and Mrs. Dodsworth, who was going out at the time, had kindly posted the letter for her in the rhododendrons.

She now drew her chair a little closer to Mrs. Fennimore's and taking two fire-screens from the mantelpiece she handed one to her companion. Then holding hers so that only her eyes, her lace head-dress, and the upper part of her curls showed over it—

"I am so glad to have this opportunity," she began in a low voice, "of consulting with you, Mrs. Fennimore."

"Of consulting with *me*?" said Mrs. Fennimore, staring at her, as she settled her neat feet more comfortably on the fender.

"Yes," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "Though our acquaintance is not a long one I feel that we have much in common, and

that there is no one else here that I would care to consult with."

As she spoke she watched the effect of her words with some anxiety, but Mrs. Fennimore immediately rose to the bait, and for the first time since her encounter with Miss Eldershaw, Jane regained full confidence in herself.

"Yes—they are a little—— You know what I mean," said Mrs. Fennimore.

"They are," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "And what I want now is a practical woman of the world."

"I understand," said Mrs. Fennimore, trying not to look gratified and tucking up her satin skirt so that her petticoat only might be exposed to the heat. "Well, I'm sure if I can do anything," she added, getting her fire-screen into position again.

Mrs. Dodsworth hitched her chair yet nearer, glanced over her shoulder, and waited for a moment, listening.

"They are all gone," said Mrs. Fennimore.

"I wanted to be quite sure," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "This is such a very delicate matter. Mrs. Fennimore—have you examined your jewel-case lately? Last night or the night before I mean?"

Mrs. Fennimore almost dropped her fire-screen.

"Examined my jewel-case?" she exclaimed.

"Because," said Mrs. Dodsworth, "I have reason to think—I am extremely sorry to say so—but I am certain that there is thieving going on here."

"My dear Mrs. Dodsworth!" ejaculated Mrs. Fennimore.

"I am certain," continued Mrs. Dodsworth, "because I myself have lost my diamond and emerald pendant."

"Not," exclaimed Mrs. Fennimore, "surely not the heirloom?"

Mrs. Dodsworth nodded solemnly.

"It was taken out of its case," she added after a moment. "I never could have imagined anything so barefaced. It was in the case on the dressing-table when I went to bed

last night and this morning the case was open and quite empty. That is why I asked you about your jewel-case. I wondered——”

Mrs. Fennimore rose.

“Wait here,” she said concisely, and then she went rustling away upstairs.

Mrs. Dodsworth had only moved her fire-screen to and fro about a dozen times when her companion returned much shaken and sat down again breathing quickly.

“Well?” said Mrs. Dodsworth.

“This is fearful,” said Mrs. Fennimore in a whisper. “My box is simply gutted. All the underneath tray is gone.”

“Was there much in it?” said Mrs. Dodsworth, leaning forward and speaking also in a whisper.

“Much in it!” exclaimed Mrs. Fennimore, forgetting to whisper in her excitement. “All the Fennimore sapphires were in it.”

“And do you mean to say you kept the box unlocked?”

“Certainly not, but they must have found the keys. I always have been careless with keys. I ought not to have left them in my drawer.”

“Naturally, however,” said Mrs. Dodsworth, “you thought, like me, that this was a house of gentlefolk. Who would have thought—whoever would have dreamed——”

“Who indeed,” said Mrs. Fennimore. “Nevertheless——” she glanced over her shoulder—“I never have cared much for that Miss Charteris, you know.”

“Miss Charteris!” exclaimed Mrs. Dodsworth utterly taken by surprise. “Surely you do not——”

“Yes, I could,” said Mrs. Fennimore. “She was very rude to me one night some time ago in defence of that man Green, who is, by the way, also a suspicious character.”

She paused for a reply, but Jane was silenced for the moment.

It had somehow never occurred to her that Ann would be implicated. She seemed so far above any possibility of

suspicion. Besides for all her boasted lack of sentiment Jane had her weaknesses and one was a love of beauty for its own sake. Whenever she had seen Ann she had, in a manner, fallen in love with her. Thus for a moment she had nothing to say. A little reflection, however, restored her sangfroid. The whole thing would only last for a few days. Then all would be clear again. No matter then who was suspected. The more the better. The more unlikely people the better. *Vogue la galère!*

"Ah, you think so?" she said with raised eyebrows.

"I do," said Mrs. Fennimore. "Who else is in and out of our rooms at all hours?"

"The servants perhaps," suggested Mrs. Dodsworth.

"These old women?" said Mrs. Fennimore. "No, my dear Mrs. Dodsworth. No. But you should have heard how that girl stuck up for that chauffeur man. She was most insolent to me. But we shall see now what we shall see."

"But, Mrs. Fennimore," said Mrs. Dodsworth hastily, "we must say nothing to any one for a few days."

Mrs. Fennimore stared. Disagreement, even rebellion, sparkled and snapped in her little narrow eyes.

"It is our only chance, believe me, of recovering our property," Mrs. Dodsworth went on. "I have written to a great friend of my late husband's, a Sir Joseph Bird. No doubt you have heard of him. No? One of the greatest living detectives. They always consult him at Scotland Yard. And though no one could be more impatient about it than I am, until he comes or sends some one to handle the case we must act as if nothing had happened, so that the thief may be taken unawares, you understand."

"Ah, I see," said Mrs. Fennimore, but still doubtfully.

"I was sorry I could not consult you first," said Mrs. Dodsworth, "before writing to Sir Joseph. But there was no opportunity."

"You have done just as I should have done, Mrs. Dodsworth," said Mrs. Fennimore graciously. "The only

objection I should have had would have been that in the meantime—before your friend has had time to arrive—more may be stolen.”

“I thought of that,” said Mrs. Dodsworth. “But it does not matter, does it, that the thief should go on stealing if in the end he is captured?”

“She you mean?” said Mrs. Fennimore.

“She,” Mrs. Dodsworth corrected herself. “On the other hand, we could stop the stealing now, of course, by publishing the matter abroad, but it would be extremely unlikely that we should ever see our property again.”

“How long will it be before—Sir Joseph Bird can be here?” said Mrs. Fennimore.

“I have told him to come at once,” said Mrs. Dodsworth. “I know he will come as soon as he possibly can. My husband and he were such very great friends. They used to spend hours discussing cases together and it was most interesting. I am acting now on what I used to hear then. ‘My dear Mrs. Dodsworth,’ he used to say to me. ‘More things are lost by being premature in raising an alarm than any one would believe. Never do anything till an expert is on the spot if you can possibly help it, and in delicate cases—*avoid the local police!*’”

“Did he say that?” said Mrs. Fennimore.

“He did indeed,” said Mrs. Dodsworth, “and so I know he will come at once. But, of course, he may be a little detained. A man whom even royalty consults——”

“And the trains are very irregular just now,” said Mrs. Fennimore.

“Oh, once he gets clear of London that will not detain him,” said Mrs. Dodsworth. “He always travels by special train.”

Mrs. Fennimore was silent for a moment gazing meditatively at the fire, her brows drawn together, her lower lip protruded, while Mrs. Dodsworth sat silent also watching her.

“I see the advisability, Mrs. Dodsworth,” she said at

last, "of keeping the matter quiet—between ourselves I mean—but what about the others?"

"The others?" exclaimed Mrs. Dodsworth. "Have they too lost something?"

"Not that I know of," said Mrs. Fennimore. "But what's to hinder their losing something and making an outcry if we don't warn them?"

"My dear Mrs. Fennimore," said Mrs. Dodsworth, glancing over her shoulder again and then laying her hand impressively upon her companion's arm, "if you take my advice you will *not* warn them."

"Why not?" said Mrs. Fennimore. "How are you going to keep them quiet if anything does happen?"

"We must just chance that," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "If they do lose something they may never miss it, just as you never missed the lower tray out of your jewel-case till I drew your attention to it. Besides," Mrs. Dodsworth smiled a peculiar smile, "we do not really know who the thief is. Do we? You suspect Miss Charteris. Yet you have no proof that it *is* Miss Charteris."

Again she smiled her peculiar smile. And this time a reflection of it appeared upon the face of Mrs. Fennimore.

"My dear Mrs. Dodsworth," she said, "surely——"

"One can never be sure," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "Such queer things happen."

"Oh, I know," said Mrs. Fennimore eagerly. "There was a woman once at an hotel where I was staying in Switzerland—a millionairess too—who had taken a fancy to——"

"An heirloom? Yes, I quite believe it," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "There are things that cannot be bought with money, you know."

"Well, well!" said Mrs. Fennimore, settling herself more comfortably in her chair. "One lives and learns. Now whom do you suspect?"

"I do not like to say—to *you*," said Mrs. Dodsworth meaningly.

The two looked at each other steadily over their fire-screens for a few seconds.

"She was certainly playing very badly both to-day and yesterday," said Mrs. Fennimore at last with apparent irrelevance.

Mrs. Dodsworth understood, however.

"I noticed that," she said at once.

"She is a queer creature, you know, Mrs. Dodsworth," Mrs. Fennimore went on with unction. "I have always made allowances for her—for you know they do say that old Pitmirran married his cook—and as we are neighbours I have always tried to be friendly—but she is a queer creature. There's no doubt about that."

"Have you noticed that?" said Mrs. Dodsworth.

"Oh, always," said Mrs. Fennimore. "Between ourselves, she has shifty eyes. And—but this must go no further, Mrs. Dodsworth——"

"Oh, no—certainly not," said Mrs. Dodsworth.

Mrs. Fennimore leaned forward and spoke behind her firescreen. "She *said* she had not noticed that revoke she made last week," she whispered. "*But——*"

Here Mrs. Fennimore shrugged her shoulders, pursed her lips, and shook her head.

"Ah, did you think that too?" said Mrs. Dodsworth, who had herself not thought it till that moment. "Then I was *not* mistaken?"

"No, Mrs. Dodsworth," said Mrs. Fennimore, with determined firmness. "No, I am sorry, but I am afraid you were not. And a woman who can do *that——*"

"Well, it confirms me, anyhow," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "One hates to think evil of people, but really——"

"It's distressing," said Mrs. Fennimore. "It's very distressing."

But she did not look at all distressed. Indeed, since she had been at Bartonsmuir she had never enjoyed herself so thoroughly.

"And to think," she went on, "that I have known Bethia

Pitmirran for twenty years. I quite agree with you now, Mrs. Dodsworth. We must hush this affair up all we can. Poor Bethia!"

"Oh, Sir Joseph will make that all right," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "He has great tact and discretion."

"Nevertheless," said Mrs. Fennimore, "I suppose it's bound to come out somehow. People are so malicious and her neighbours at home, except me, all dislike her so."

"Would you prefer then, Mrs. Fennimore," said Jane, "that she should be given a hint quietly in order that she may have a chance of replacing the things?"

"My dear Mrs. Dodsworth," said Mrs. Fennimore, "much as I should wish to do so, I could never think of such a thing. Sorry as I am for Bethia, I feel she must take the consequences of her action. To allow her to do otherwise would be to defeat justice."

"In that case," said Mrs. Dodsworth, rising and replacing her fire-screen on the mantelpiece, "till Sir Joseph Bird comes not a word. Is that agreed?"

"Not a syllable," said Mrs. Fennimore.

On her way up to bed Mrs. Dodsworth paused to pay a passing visit to her other accomplice, Miss Eldershaw, whose unexpected intractability that afternoon had given her some thrills of uneasiness. Tapping softly at the old lady's bedroom door and receiving no response she opened it and cautiously peeped in.

All was perfect peace apparently. The candle was extinguished. Only a faint light came from the fire. By it Mrs. Dodsworth could just see the outline of Miss Eldershaw upon the bed. Her back was towards her. The clothes were pulled up over her ears. Nothing could be seen of her but her nightcap.

Nevertheless, though she took no notice and was apparently quite unaware of the presence of a visitor Miss Eldershaw was by no means asleep. She was feeling by this time indeed that she would never be able to sleep more till she

was safe in her bed in her old house again. Every sound in the passage outside her door startled her. Every cinder that dropped from the grate gave her palpitations. Might not the thief in the house at any moment appear before her? The room seemed to be full of queer unaccountable noises.

It was not so much that she dreaded being robbed as the thought of what it would be her duty to do if that did happen that worried her. For this reason she had put everything of value that she had under the part of the bolster that was between her and the back of the bed. As long as she lay there, she reflected, no one could possibly touch any of these things without her knowing it. All she had to do then was to stay in bed until her niece came, which, she reckoned, would be in about a week's time. She had heard that night from her certainly that she was going on further to some unpronounceable destination, but the letter she had written that evening to her would reach her in time to stop her going there. And whenever Ellen read it she would be sure to act upon it. The one thing her aunt was afraid of was that it might unduly upset Ellen. She had not dared to be explicit and on thinking over what she had written it seemed to her very alarming. She would not have liked to receive such a letter from her aunt if she were a niece. . . . Well, she could not help it. After all it was entirely Ellen's own fault. If she was alarmed now it would be a lesson to her. It was rather pleasant to think of Ellen the deserter hurrying across the continent of Europe torn with anxiety to effect her rescue. The thought of it soothed Ellen the elder as nothing else would have done, and just as she was picturing to herself her reception of the repentant V.A.D. kneeling remorsefully before her she unexpectedly fell asleep.

Next morning there were inquiries on every hand for Miss Eldershaw. Not that she was missed at all as a social unit. It was merely as though some familiar piece of furniture had been removed. There was a blank where she generally sat, a gap in the circle of the Wrack-straws, and

as if her absence were having a strange effect, though her presence had never made any difference to anybody, there was a certain blight that day upon the geniality of the company assembled round the breakfast table.

Miss Caroline, still herbaceous, as Mrs. Bellairs expressed it, answered everybody very politely but very much at random.

"It's not enlivening, you know," Mrs. Bellairs whispered to Ann, "to be told in the midst of saying something to her about submarines that saxifrages are not wanted."

Miss Emily was absorbed in trying to repair her sister's omissions and in the unsuccessful attempt to hear what she was saying and talk to some one else at the same time. Miss Gellatly, as her custom was when the conversation did not interest her, had, with an apology to the company, propped a book up before her.

Ann was dull and rather silent. Mrs. Fennimore and Mrs. Dodsworth, on the other hand, kept up a conversation of feverish liveliness, full of hits at Mrs. Pitmirran, who ate a hearty breakfast and was apparently quite unconscious of them.

Mr. Tosh sat blinking at everybody in turn, munching toast, and saying little. He would not have come up to breakfast at all after his vigil of the night before had it not been that he considered himself bound to do so in his character of Dr. Watson. He took the first opportunity of excusing himself, and hurried out to give his colleague the latest news.

His colleague stopped digging in admiration when Miss Eldershaw's latest manoeuvre was revealed to him.

"It really is clever," he remarked. "She'll be using the bed as a hiding-place, and clearing out as soon as she has collected all she wants. If only we knew when and how she means to do it. But we must just be ready to stand to at any minute."

Mr. Tosh went on to finish his book after that, but found it impossible to concentrate and had a most unsatisfactory

morning. To crown all, Walter inadvertently put his paw into the ink and then walked over about two dozen finished pages.

After dinner, the author became so sleepy that he had to give it up and go home to bed, leaving the placidly unconscious Mrs. Pitmirran exposed to a cross-fire of double-entendres at the three-handed bridge-table.

The next day the shadow over the household had not lifted, and the day after that there was gloom outside as well for an easterly haar came up out of the sea, and grey and ghostly crept up to the very windows. This lasted for three days and then the wind began and rose to a storm about the evening of the fourth day. The noise reminded Ann of the night when the idea of the Wrack-straws was first conceived. Doors and windows creaked. Rain lashed against the panes. Mr. Tosh did not come up to dinner and, unlike Miss Eldershaw, he made a very appreciable social difference.

After dinner, Miss Gellatly, though she did consent to sing, chose songs all about eerie, dreary happenings.

Ann shivered as she listened and let her work fall on her lap, as she was reft away into a strange wild ballad-world.

She sat leaning forward, her eyes fixed on Miss Gellatly, a shadow among the shadows at the piano. She needed no candles and no music, she said, and she could sing best without either. That night the surging storm accompanied her, too, and her far-away voice sounded weirdly as though it were part of it all. So did the songs, half-human, half of fairyland. On such a night, thought Ann, might Thomas the Rymer and the elfin queen have set forth on their uncanny journeying.

“And they gaed on and further on,
And they waded the river above the knee,
And they saw neither sun nor moon
But they heard the roarin’ of the sea.”

But as she listened a change gradually came over the spirit of her dream, and it seemed to her as though through

the wind and the rain she heard the sounds of the distant battle-fields and saw a great multitude going forward through the shadows of young warriors with faces like the dear dead Jim's, like the soldier's she had seen in the railway carriage, ghastly, sunken-eyed, exhausted. . . .

Then the thought of the man so near yet so far from her, who was not among them, struck her as with a blow.

Ah, why was he not there, too, in this great legion of honour? Why was he not going forward too? Why was he lingering here in the background where people thought strange thoughts of him, said strange things?

Miss Gellatly had ceased playing for the moment. The rain was battering now on the windows. The gale was howling in the chimneys. It seemed to Ann as though the storm-spirit must break in. She wished wildly that it would. Suddenly she felt as though she could not bear the warm scented room, the low voices of the bridge-players, Miss Caroline at her herb-garden, Mrs. Bellairs sitting twiddling her rings.

Ah, why was she not a man that she might pass triumphantly out from all this and offer up her empty life on the field of honour? Then with no thought of shame she might have taken her love by the hand and have said, "Come with me, let us fare forth, you and I, and fighting gloriously side by side go out into the beyond together. . . ."

Ah, if she could have done that!

But no—she was only a woman. She must watch in silence the man who had become all the world to her, play the part of a carpet-knight, a squire of dames like old Mr. Tosh, while others, mere weaklings in comparison, flung themselves into the strife like heroes.

It seemed incredible to her that he was not among them. Those eyes which had looked into hers were not coward's eyes. Her heart beat more quickly again as she remembered what he had said—

"Will you take my word for it that, so help me God, I would never do anything you would think unworthy?"

Yet that great multitude of heroes was marching on and on, leaving him behind them. Was this worthy? Was this honourable?

She had defended him against these old women, but had they not had a right to whisper? Had they not had a right to look askance at him?

The thought of it all suddenly seemed to suffocate her.

But at that moment Miss Gellatly began to play again—slow, deep, soft chords that swept soothingly over her troubled heart-strings. It was a magician's touch. The tumult within her sank to rest and presently, in a strange silence of the soul, she sat with parted lips content to listen.

“My own, own love, if thou in the grave,
The darksome grave must be,
Then will I go down by the side and crave
Love-room for thee and me. . . .
The dead will rise, the dead may rise
And pass up to heaven above,
But we will remain in the darkness there,
Close clasped in each other's love. . . .”

“What's that?” said Ann breathlessly as the music ceased.

“It's Heine,” said Miss Gellatly. “Have I never sung it to you before?”

“No, never,” said Ann.

She sat on in that strange inner silence. The poet had spoken for her the ultimate word. She knew now that, if it must be so, her love would go down even into the depths of dishonour and condemnation.

Miss Gellatly made as though she would begin something else.

“Ah, please,” said Ann, “let that be the last to-night.”

Miss Gellatly rose at once, glancing at her curiously.

“That's right,” said Mrs. Bellairs's comfortable voice far down the room. “Your songs are all perfectly lovely, Miss Gellatly dear, but have they not been to-night, for the kind of night it is, a *little* dismal?”

Miss Gellatly laughed as she shut up the piano.

"I can't help it to-night," she said. "It's in the air somehow, or perhaps misfortune is brooding over us."

"Oh, don't!" cried Mrs. Bellairs, warding the words off with her plump white hands. "It's the wind I'm sure. It always gets on my nerves, too. . . . Well, thank goodness, here's the post-bag."

Even the post-bag, however, was that night unsatisfactory. It contained mostly circulars and half-penny envelopes. There were only two letters in it, one for the cook, and one in a battled envelope with "On Active Service" on it for Miss Eldershaw.

"Who is the one person not present, of course, to give us the news," grumbled Mrs. Bellairs as Arbutnot bore it away again. "If this goes on much longer I shall have to take to draughts which will inaugurate the very last stage of my earthly existence."

The night was not over for Mrs. Bellairs, however, though when bed-time came she retired as usual.

"But whether it was the wind, my dear, I do not know," she said afterwards when she was telling Ann all about it, "but no more than Nebuchadnezzar could I sleep one wink."

In vain she tried getting up and sitting reading by the fire. In vain she tried eating biscuits and walking up and down the room. Nothing had the least effect, and well past midnight she was still broad awake.

She had resigned herself to fate and was making up the fire again when, during a pause in the storm outside, she was certain that she heard an unusual sound in the next room to hers. Miss Eldershaw, she remembered, was her neighbour on that side. There was a door of communication between them, too. It was locked, however, and the key had been removed.

"Can she be worse or something?" said Mrs. Bellairs to herself. Then partly out of kindness and partly because it would help to pass the long hours between that moment and her morning tea she determined to go and see if any-

thing was the matter. She was already warmly clad in kimono and slippers of luxurious thickness. Adding a shawl, nevertheless, she took up her candle and stepping along the passage she tapped at Miss Eldershaw's door.

There was no direct answer, but again she heard the mysterious sound.

"She is in a fit," said Mrs. Bellairs with conviction, and without further parley she opened the door and went in. As she went forward with some trepidation, shading her candle with one hand and peering into the recesses of the big four-posted bed, the first thing she became aware of was a small mountain of clothes there covered by a flowered quilt. This at intervals heaved violently, and from the midst of it came curious snorts.

"She is suffocating you know," said Mrs. Bellairs to herself in a kind of desperation, for she was not what Miss Eldershaw would have called an expert. Her kindly heart, however, came to her assistance. Setting her candle on the dressing-table she advanced towards the bed. For the first time then she became aware of two hands adorned with mourning rings firmly clutching the clothes at the top of it.

The patient then was conscious and of set purpose submerged. This was a relief. The matter, however, was all the more mysterious.

"Is anything wrong, Miss Eldershaw?" she said pleasantly, laying her hand on the flowered quilt.

The effect of this treatment was as instantaneous as it was unexpected.

The bed-clothes were flung violently back and Miss Eldershaw bounded up into a sitting posture. Her face was scarlet and swollen almost out of recognition. Her little eyes were mere slits full of unshed tears.

"Ah, so it's you, is it?" she said in a vindictive whisper as she backed up against the part of the bolster which was between her and the back of the bed. "Well, you'll not get one of them. I—I'll die first. And you don't want to be a murderess, too, I suppose?"

"Good heavens, she's delirious!" thought Mrs. Bellairs, and wished that the bell-rope had been on her side of the bed. It was on the other side, however, between the bed and the wall. But she felt she must ring for some one and was leaning over to snatch at the rope when suddenly the patient announced—

"If you come one inch nearer I'll drink this Bow's Liniment straight off."

And to her horror she saw that in her trembling hand Miss Eldershaw was holding a dark blue medicine bottle.

"Then I knew that it was not sick-nursing she wanted, but commonsense," Mrs. Bellairs related afterwards.

"Put that down," she said, "and don't talk rubbish. Rather tell me what's the matter with you—or shall I fetch Miss Caroline? I don't want to pry into your affairs. I only came in hearing that you were awake, too—out of kindness, and I am ready to go away this minute. Nobody can say that Maud Bellairs ever forced her company upon anybody."

Here she took up her candle again.

"Well, shall I fetch Miss Caroline?" she said once more.

"No—oh, no——" exclaimed Miss Eldershaw. "At least—yes—— Oh, I don't know what to do——"

Then clasping the blue medicine bottle in both hands she bent her head down upon it and began sobbing in the most distressing manner.

Mrs. Bellairs was touched, and setting down her candle again she seated herself on the edge of the bed.

"My poor old friend," she said when she thought it likely that she would be heard, "something is worrying you. Is there nothing I can do to help?"

There was no verbal answer, but one of the hands clasping the bottle was removed and stretched out blindly towards the comforting voice.

Mrs. Bellairs secured it and patted it gently.

"That's right," she said. "Now tell me what is wrong."

"My niece refuses to come home," Miss Eldershaw just

managed to articulate after three attempts. "I've had a letter to-night. She won't come."

"But do you want her to come?" said Mrs. Bellairs surprised. "You do not need her when you are here, do you?"

"Yes, I do," burst out Miss Eldershaw. "I want her to take me away from this place."

"Take you away?" exclaimed Mrs. Bellairs. "But I thought you were so happy here. Only the other day you told me——"

"Ah, yes, but that was before I got mixed up in—what I am mixed up in," said Miss Eldershaw, wiping her eyes.

"Mixed up?" said Mrs. Bellairs more and more mystified. "As I said before I don't want to pry, but if you care to tell me what your difficulty is——"

Again she patted the hand she held persuasively.

"And perhaps I mesmerised her unconsciously," she said afterwards, "for quite soon she burst out saying that she would tell me in spite of everybody, and though she would not give up the Bow's Liniment she tucked it away under the bolster to oblige me."

About half an hour after this Mrs. Bellairs with a gravity quite unusual on her comely countenance entered Miss Caroline's room without knocking.

As she had expected, the lady of the house was sound asleep. Faint snores could be heard from behind her curtains. She could be seen in the shadow of them in dignified repose like the recumbent statue of some queen regent, her thick grey-gold hair in long plaits on either side of her, her large hands clasped across her substantial middle.

Mrs. Bellairs at another time would have paused to look at her. That night she did not linger.

"Caroline!" she said shaking her. "Caroline, wake up!"

The faint snoring ceased.

"No, Green. No," said the sleeper calmly, "that bed is for the fox-gloves, the second year fox-gloves."

Mrs. Bellairs did not even smile. She dashed back the curtain nearest to her so that the rings rattled like a machine-gun battery. At this Miss Caroline opened her eyes and seeing Mrs. Bellairs hanging over her—

"Maud? You here?" she said without moving.

"Yes, Caroline, and with news—bad news," said Mrs. Bellairs, "of a state of matters in this house that only your brain can deal with, that only you *should* deal with, and so I have come to you at once, my dear."

Miss Caroline without speaking raised herself in the bed.

"Be kind enough to hand me my Paisley," she said then.

Mrs. Bellairs handed her the wrap. She adjusted it round her, piled the pillows behind her, and folded her arms.

"Now, Maud," she said leaning back, "what is it?"

In a few plain words Mrs. Bellairs then described her recent reception by Miss Eldershaw.

"But the woman must be mad," remarked Miss Caroline when she came to the blue medicine bottle.

"Oh no, she is not," said Mrs. Bellairs. "But she has been temporarily deranged by being made the recipient of a secret."

"A secret?"

"Yes. What she thinks a dishonourable secret."

A faint flush rose in Miss Caroline's cheeks.

"A dishonourable secret in this house?" she said slowly.

"Yes, in this house," said Mrs. Bellairs. "Indeed, not to mince matters, Caroline, there is somebody burgling in this house."

"Eh?" said Miss Caroline sharply.

"Burgling," repeated Mrs. Bellairs with emphasis.

"Sit down, Maud dear," said Miss Caroline soothingly. "You are excited. You are overwrought."

"Not at all," replied Mrs. Bellairs with heat. "It is impossible in my opinion to be overwrought in this matter. When it comes to Miss Eldershaw being obliged to keep all her valuables under her bolster and to stay in bed to protect them——"

"But, my dear Maud——"

"It's true. She has everything she values collected there, from those priceless black pearls in the Florentine setting that she has to the silver thimble that her great-aunt left her."

"How ridiculous of her!" exclaimed Miss Caroline.

"Not at all," retorted Mrs. Bellairs again. "I think it remarkably clever of her since Mrs. Dodsworth had told her that her diamond and emerald pendant had been stolen."

"What?" exclaimed Miss Caroline. "The Napoleonic heirloom?"

"That," said Mrs. Bellairs.

"But when was this?" said Miss Caroline, sitting up.

"About a week ago," said Mrs. Bellairs.

"About a week ago?" exclaimed the lady of the house.

"And this is the first time I have heard of it?"

"I thought you would be annoyed," said Mrs. Bellairs.

"Where is Miss Eldershaw?" said Miss Caroline, preparing to rise.

But Mrs. Bellairs laid a detaining hand upon her.

"My dear, don't go to her now!" she said. "You'll only upset her again. I said you would see her about it in the morning. She is probably sleeping now in sheer relief at having told me. She has hardly slept for about a week, you must remember, though she has been in bed all the time."

"Poor creature," said Miss Caroline. "But why did she not tell me?"

"My dear, she was dying to," said Mrs. Bellairs. "But they told her not to."

"Told her not to?" exclaimed Miss Caroline with indignation. "Who dared——"

"Well Mrs. Dodsworth first," said Mrs. Bellairs, "and then Mr. Tosh."

"*Mr. Tosh!*" ejaculated Miss Caroline.

"Yes—one can understand Mrs. Dodsworth," said Mrs.

Bellairs. "She was the loser and did not want to vex you. But one can *not* understand Mr. Tosh."

For a few moments Miss Caroline sat sore amazed.

Then with great dignity—

"He doubtless has his reasons," she said. "The problem with which we have now to deal concerns, in my opinion at least, no one but ourselves."

"Right, Caroline," said Mrs. Bellairs. "I knew, dear," she added, "that you would hit the nail on the head immediately."

"No, Maud—no," said Miss Caroline, staring straight before her, "it will take some time I fear. Will you kindly tell Arbuthnot to bring me some hot milk?"

"No, dear," said Mrs. Bellairs, "but I'll heat you some myself. There's sure to be some in the hall still. I'll go downstairs for it as soon as I have poked up your fire. I know you like a good fire—don't you, Caroline?—to do your thinking at."

"But, dear Maud," said Miss Caroline, "surely it is not necessary for you——"

"It is," said Mrs. Bellairs, "because I can't sleep and I must have something to do. Besides," she added, pausing with her hand on the door-handle, "in the meantime, of course, Arbuthnot must have no inkling of what has happened."

"Is it likely, Maud," said Miss Caroline stiffening, "that I should in such a case consult Arbuthnot?"

"No, Caroline," said Mrs. Bellairs, "though it concerns her, of course, as much as any of us."

With this parting speech Mrs. Bellairs left the room, but when she returned in about five minutes she found Miss Caroline still pondering over it. She was sunk in such deep thought that she did not notice her friend's entrance. The storm besides, which was in full force at this side of the house, would have rendered a much louder sound than that of satin-slipped footsteps inaudible.

At last, however, Miss Caroline looked up and saw her.

"Ah, thank you, Maud," she said as she accepted the hot milk. "You said something just now," she went on, "which opened up new vistas to me. Surely," she paused for a moment, "surely you don't think, Maud, that any of our guests would suspect any of our servants of stealing the pendant?"

Mrs. Bellairs laughed her slow comfortable laugh.

"My dear Caroline, I myself was suspected," she said. "Miss Eldershaw said when I came in—'Ah, so it's you, is it?' She gave me quite a turn."

Miss Caroline remained grave.

"This is no laughing matter," she said. "Leave me now, Maud, if you please."

"And when may I come back?" said Mrs. Bellairs as she obediently moved off.

"When I am ready I shall come to you," said Miss Caroline.

Before Mrs. Bellairs had reached the door she was plunged once more into profound meditation.

Mrs. Bellairs lingered fascinated for a moment or two longer.

"She's like Madame Blavatsky when she glares in front of her like that," she said to herself, looking back half-awestruck at her friend.

Miss Caroline, indeed, seated with folded arms by the fire, her pale eyes fixed, her long amber-grey plaits dangling, had a somewhat weird and sinister appearance. The wind was roaring round her ancient house, the rain was battering on her windows, but in her abstraction sitting there she seemed superior to the elements.

It must have been two hours or so after that according to the reckoning of Mrs. Bellairs when that lady was aroused from her first doze that night by Miss Caroline's voice saying to her, "I have come to a decision, Maud."

She started up in her bed, for she had lain down, and found Miss Caroline standing at the foot of it.

"Have you, Caroline?" she said, only half awake.

"The thing I have decided to do," Miss Caroline went on, "is to hold a conference of the whole household to-morrow evening."

"About the theft of the pendant?"

"About the theft of the pendant."

"Oh—yes——" said Mrs. Bellairs doubtfully.

"You should be pleased with the idea," was Miss Caroline's next remark, "since it arose from your suggestion."

"My suggestion?" exclaimed Mrs. Bellairs.

"It was you who reminded me," said Miss Caroline, "that the affair concerned the servants too. I had not thought of the servants in connection with it."

"But, my good Caroline," cried Mrs. Bellairs, "doesn't one in such a case generally think of the servants first?"

"Suspect them, you mean?"

Mrs. Bellairs nodded.

"Not in this house, Maud," said Miss Caroline grandly. "Nothing would ever make me think that any of *my* people would steal anything."

"I see," said Mrs. Bellairs smiling, "you prefer to suspect your guests, Caroline."

"My guests too are above suspicion," said Miss Caroline. "I shall call this conference together merely to warn them that some outsider—some German probably—has succeeded in gaining access to the premises. I shall also have notices posted about the grounds——"

"Eh?" said Mrs. Bellairs.

"I shall also have notices posted about the grounds," repeated Miss Caroline, "for the benefit of this outsider, whoever he may be——"

"Or she——" put in Mrs. Bellairs.

"Or she," repeated Miss Caroline, "announcing to him or her that if the pendant is returned within twenty-four hours no blame will attach to anybody."

For a few moments Mrs. Bellairs sat staring in dumb-founded silence. Then suddenly she was overcome with silent laughter. Almost immediately, however, under the

influence of her companion's cold surprise, she recovered her gravity though with some difficulty.

"Caroline," she said, "you are indeed very remarkable. What time will this conference take place?"

"In the evening," said Miss Caroline, "immediately after prayers, and I myself will post the notices after breakfast to-morrow morning."

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Miss Caroline, however, was destined once more on this occasion to be the sport of circumstances. The conference was not held nor even called for that evening. When the maid brought in her morning tea to Mrs. Bellairs she brought a message with it from Miss Caroline requesting her immediate presence.

"My dear Caroline, you are not ill, are you?" said Mrs. Bellairs as she hastened in.

"No, thank you, Maud—no," said Miss Caroline. "But—will you be good enough to shut the door?—I have just had a letter from Dr. Warren which will, I fear, modify our arrangements a little."

"Is he coming?" cried Mrs. Bellairs.

"By this time he is already on his way," said Miss Caroline. "Indeed," here she referred to the letter again, examining it through her long-handled eye-glasses, "he hopes to be here in time for dinner. And what makes this visit so specially interesting, Maud," she added, "is that he has been called up and is going abroad immediately."

"Then the conference must be off, of course," said Mrs. Bellairs, eyeing her hostess a trifle anxiously.

"One never could be sure what Caroline might do, you know," she said afterwards. "The word impossible is not in her vocabulary."

"Yes, I am afraid it must," said Miss Caroline, however, to her companion's great relief. "Whatever may be the result of the delay we cannot spoil his visit—the first after twenty years——"

"And perhaps his last," put in Mrs. Bellairs, shaking her head.

"By any domestic disturbance," concluded Miss Caroline, "if we can help it."

"I agree with you, Caroline," said Mrs. Bellairs heartily. "After all," she added, "he will not be staying long."

"Only one night," said Miss Caroline. "It seems a long journey for so short a time. But of course he wants to see Miss Charteris before he goes. By the way—there is an enclosure for Miss Charteris."

"Let me take it to her," said Mrs. Bellairs. "And now be advised by me, Caroline, and stay in bed to breakfast."

"Certainly not, Maud," said Miss Caroline, preparing to rise. "At a time of crisis like the present the head of the house must not absent herself."

Thus dismissed, Mrs. Bellairs betook herself with the enclosure from the Lowhampton letter to Ann's room.

"He wishes to see Ann," she muttered to herself, hugging her kimono round her as she stepped along the chilly passage. "But will Ann wish to see *him*?"

It seemed that she did. Her eyes were eager as she read the few lines that the letter contained.

"He has been called up," she exclaimed.

Then looking up she found Mrs. Bellairs still standing watching her.

"And he is to be here this evening," she added breathlessly.

"Ah, that's delightful," said Mrs. Bellairs. "For you, at least," she added, laughing her soft slow laugh. "We Wrack-straws I suppose may expect to be deserted."

"I shouldn't wonder if you will be," said Ann, growing grave all of a sudden. "I have so much to tell him."

Her eyes grew far-away even as she spoke and a curious shadow seemed to darken in them.

"Well, well!" said Mrs. Bellairs, as she left the room unobserved. "Poor Fred may just as well pack up his bag again."

Returning along the passage she bethought herself of Miss Eldershaw and peeped in at the door of that much-tried old woman. No agitated pile of bed-clothes was to be seen in the bed now, but a happy old lady placidly unconscious of all perturbation. Everything had failed to wake her—bells, gongs, Williams with her morning tea, the opening of the window-curtains, the sunshine pouring in upon her.

“Poor lamb!” said Mrs. Bellairs as she pulled the curtains together again, and drawing the door to after her she left her to her well-earned slumbers.

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

IN WHICH TWO PEOPLE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE WRACK-
STRAWS ARRIVE AT BARTONSMUIR

"But, my own little Ann," David Warren had ended his letter, "when you say you want me that is enough for me, as you know. I shall be with you on Saturday then without fail. By the time this reaches you I shall be far on my way to you."

Then having dispatched this to the post he began to wonder how he was ever going to accomplish it. In ten days he was to go abroad, and there were endless things to do first.

"At the worst I can always wire of course," he reminded himself, as one hindrance after another loomed up before him.

It was about nine in the morning and he had been out all night. His breakfast had been waiting for an hour. It occurred to him that while he was planning he might as well be saving time by feeding also. Who knew when he would have leisure for another meal? He rang the bell and a maid appeared.

"Is any one in the waiting-room?" he asked her.

"Five, sir, and Mr. Atterbury," she answered. "Mr. Atterbury said he wouldn't keep you long, sir, he only wanted to speak to you for five minutes."

"Ask him to come in here," said David.

A few minutes later Mr. Atterbury the lawyer, fragrant with scented soap, neat and dapper as though he had come out of a band-box, was seated also at the breakfast-table.

"It's too bad troubling you when you are so busy," he said, as the maid placed a steaming cup of coffee before him. "You must be fairly run off your feet just now. When were you in bed last night?"

"Never," laughed the doctor, "but I shall get some sleep to-night, perhaps. I am going up to Scotland by the midnight train from St. Pancras."

"To Scotland!" exclaimed the lawyer. "How do you manage it at this juncture?"

"I don't know yet," said his host. "But I'm going to do it, nevertheless."

"May I ask if it is to Bartonsmuir?" said Mr. Atterbury, leaning forward eagerly.

"It is," said the doctor.

Mr. Atterbury slapped his hand on the table.

"Then this is most extraordinary luck," he exclaimed. "I came here to speak to you about that very place."

"Indeed?" said the doctor sharply. "There's nothing wrong there, is there?"

He was remembering uneasily that Ann's last letter now in his breast-pocket was quite unlike all her other letters. It was short, abrupt, it had no descriptions in it, and the call to him to come had been strangely urgent.

"There's nothing wrong, is there?" he repeated, as Mr. Atterbury hesitated.

"N—no," said the little lawyer slowly, raising his eyebrows and cocking his head to one side. "Nothing definite, at least. But a nephew of mine who is in France at the present moment has a client there, a Miss Eldershaw, whose niece has just written to him, or rather to his head clerk."

"Yes, yes, Miss Eldershaw, I have heard of her," said David. "The niece went V.A.D.-ing and left her aunt with the Miss Bartons. Is the niece ill, then?"

"By no means," said Mr. Atterbury, "the niece was never better. She was starting when she wrote for somewhere in the Balkans. It is not the niece, it is the aunt who is in distress."

"The *aunt*?" said David, pausing with a piece of bacon halfway to his mouth. "What is the matter with the aunt?"

"That's what we want to know," said Mr. Atterbury.

"The niece says she can't make it out. The aunt has written her an extraordinary letter hinting at danger and disgrace and begging her to come home and take her away from Bartonsmuir before it is too late."

The doctor laid down his fork with the piece of bacon still on it.

"This is very strange," he said. "Only last week I had a letter from my—from Miss Charteris, in which she described this very old lady, Miss Eldershaw, as enjoying herself immensely watching the digging of the new herb-garden."

"Is that the case?" exclaimed Mr. Atterbury. "Then it must be, as the niece thinks, pure imagination on the aunt's part, or simply a ruse to recall the niece. She never approved of the V.A.D. work and has done all she could to hinder her doing it."

"Yes, yes, that must be it," said David.

Nevertheless, he was troubled. Ann's letter this time had been very different to the last.

"The old lady says nothing definite, then?" he said.

"No, and that was another strange thing," said Mr. Atterbury. "She said she dared not."

"Dared not?"

"No. She said she had promised not to speak."

"Promised not to speak?" exclaimed David.

"Yes, it is strange, is it not?" said Mr. Atterbury. "Of course, it is probably all part of the hallucination or senile dementia or whatever you doctors call it. But that was what rather alarmed the niece and my nephew's head clerk. She wrote to him asking him to make inquiries and he, not knowing what to do about it in his master's absence, did as he had been told to do and wrote to consult me."

"I see," said the doctor, stroking his chin thoughtfully as he did when he was very worried about a case.

Could this secret be what was troubling Ann too, and making her call to him to come to her?

Danger and disgrace!

At the thought he sprang up. He must get through now whatever happened. . . . He forced himself to speak calmly, however.

"Well, it is lucky for you, isn't it," he said, "that I am going up there to-night, Atterbury. I am to be back on Monday. Call then. Now good-bye, sir. I must be off now."

The door banged behind him and the five patients in the waiting-room pricked up their ears and laid down their picture papers.

"And off he is," said Mr. Atterbury, as he helped himself to a little more sugar because they had given it up at home. "Off he is before I had time to tell him that I had written to some one else about it."

As it happened the some one else referred to was just then reading what he had written to her. She was seated at her breakfast-table in her morning-room at The Gables, Rathness, ready overalled in neat grey linen for a strenuous canteen morning. Leaning both elbows on the table, she was holding the letter up in front of her while a Dandy Dinmont on either side sat gazing at her on the look-out for tit-bits.

She was, however, far too interested in the letter to notice them.

"Good heavens!" she said softly to herself when she had read it through once.

Then she read it through again.

"If only Jack Piffard were here!" she said then.

But Piffard at that very moment was embarking with his men for overseas.

There had been passages with Piffard, strange talks by the fire, and one long hand-clasp at parting which had seemed to both to be the summing-up of everything.

"You're a good sort, Jack," she had said with a lump in her throat. "Let's be comrades always—shall we?"

"Ay, that's it," he had returned steadily. "Comrades always, then. Good-bye, dear."

Lifting her hands to his lips he had kissed them passionately. Then he had gone forth.

She sat for a moment thinking of this.

Then with a little sigh she returned to the letter.

"MY DEAR MRS. ALLEYNE," it ran, "I must apologise for troubling you and also explain who I am, for you will of course have entirely forgotten Charlie Atterbury of Lowhampton, who used to be a humble follower in your train at the balls and meets in this neighbourhood, of which you were the reigning belle in happier days than these are. This same Charles Atterbury is now an old man with a large family of grown-up daughters, but he has his memories too, and one of them is that one of your chief charms was your invariable kind-heartedness. Be so good then, dear lady, as to pardon an old forgotten acquaintance for intruding on your time—now I hear more than fully occupied by good works—by asking you to read the enclosed letter and to advise me as to what action—if any—I should take about it. I am, as you know, very far away from Bartonsmuir and my nephew's head clerk, who is the man to whom the letter is addressed, is also at a great distance. We are both very short-handed just now and over the ears in work of all kinds. This, however, we would put aside if necessary. It seems to me, however, that by coming ourselves to Bartonsmuir we might do harm instead of good, and that you who are a relative and an intimate of the house might, without causing any disturbance, find out the cause of Miss Eldershaw's mysteriousness for us. If you can do this, or if you are already aware of what the reason of her agitation may be, I shall be exceedingly obliged and grateful if you will let me know what it is, so that I may advise my nephew's clerk what to do, and through him advise Miss Eldershaw's niece.

"Trusting that you will not think that I am presuming too much upon the memories of days that are no more, and that you will be able to give some explanation of this strange little affair,—I remain, dear Mrs. Alleyne, yours very truly, CHARLES ATTERBURY."

"Funny little Charlie!" said Mrs. Alleyne, smiling for a moment. "I wonder what the family of daughters is like. He was the one who always used to wear camélias in his button-hole. *Le Monsieur aux Camélias*. What fun we used to make of him, and how he always enjoyed it himself!"

For a moment she was back again in bygone days amid laughter now silent in the old ball-rooms at Lowhampton, and from there it took only an instant to go riding on the downs where one rode with her—*not* the *Monsieur aux Camélias*—who said he would ride with her to the world's end if she would let him. . . .

"You little fool!" she admonished herself, as she addressed herself to the enclosure.

It was written evidently in great haste and had neither date nor heading.

"DEAR SIR," it ran, "As you know, my aunt, Miss Eldershaw, is at present living at Bartonsmuir in Eastshire, Scotland, in the house of the two Miss Bartons. Up till to-day she has been writing me what, for her, are glowing accounts of everything. But to-day I have received a letter from her which is causing me some uneasiness. In it she implores me to return at once before it is too late and rescue her from an impending danger, a danger the nature of which she does not disclose.

"I cannot help thinking that this danger is purely imaginary and I feel that it is not my duty to leave here—where I am urgently needed, as several of the others are ill—to come home to my aunt unless there is real necessity for it. In any case I have no means of leaving here this week. Therefore if any real trouble is threatening my aunt I may not, even if I leave here, get home in time to avert it. In Mr. Atterbury's absence, therefore, I am writing to you asking you to be so very kind as to investigate the matter for me, and to let me know as soon as possible what you think I should do.—Yours sincerely, ELLEN ELDERSHAW."

"Now I shouldn't wonder," said Mrs. Alleyne aloud,

folding up the letter and addressing her own reflection in the tea-pot. "I shouldn't wonder in the least if this had something to do with Fred's affair. . . . Yet he said nothing in his last letter but that he now knew who the thief was and that to catch her at it would be merely a matter of days. . . . Poor old Miss Eldershaw! There must be *something* or she would have been miserable from the first. . . . If Fred. . . . I simply *must* see Fred! Wiring is no use, and writing would take too long. . . . They're half-expecting me besides. Aunt Caroline would be delighted."

She rose here and went over to the mantelpiece where a note of her engagements stood.

"O Lord!" she ejaculated, looking at the list for the day.

Then she read it over rapidly in a low voice.

"'Canteen, nine to twelve.'

"Two off ill as it is. . . . Canteen *must* be done.

"'Twelve . . . Parcels. . . .'

"Heavens, is this parcel day?

"'One. . . . The Callaghans coming to lunch—from the parcels.

"'Two to four. . . . Parcels again.

"'Four. . . . Jane Bloomfield coming to tea to talk over arrangements for the Jumble Sale.

"'Four forty-five. . . . Jumble Sale Committee.'

"And goodness knows how long that will last!

"'Six. . . . Prisoners' Committee at Mrs. Collins's to settle the dispute about——'

"That'll take another hour at least.

"'Seven-thirty. . . . The Ballard girls coming to dinner on their way to the canteen-concert, where you are to take them at eight-thirty.'

"*Are* you?" said Lottie, staring at this last memorandum in a kind of desperation.

But at that moment the pert little French clock alongside it struck nine suddenly, as though on purpose to alarm her,

and with a little shriek which startled the two dandies out of their wits and made them yelp in chorus she bounded towards her hat and Burberry.

To David Warren that day afterwards seemed like an obstacle-race where ever and anon entirely new and unexpected hindrances appeared upon the scene, fresh complications, all but insurmountable difficulties up to the very last half-hour before his departure. Had a convalescent friend—O'Brien of the R.A.M.C.—not turned up for a quiet week-end with him that departure itself would never have taken place. The timely arrival of O'Brien, however, combined with the lateness of the train to give him his chance of escape. O'Brien, whose unfailing good-humour had carried him triumphantly through many worse straits, fortunately took the desertion of his host and his own appointment as locum during his quiet week-end as excellent entertainment. That evening in the consulting-room, in the intervals of giving advice, he enjoyed himself hugely among the patients. To some he told wild tales of the trenches. To others, who looked persistently askance, he said that the doctor had had to go off on urgent business.

"That business being *you*, my darlint, or I'm much mistaken," he added afterwards when alone to Ann's photograph on the mantelpiece.

David by this time was being borne on his way to Scotland in deep unconsciousness of that and every other fact. No stoppage roused him. Ticket-collectors gave him up. He hardly stirred even when a large mud-stained bundle from the rack opposite fell upon him.

"You'd think he'd come from Armenteers instead o' me," remarked its battered-looking owner as he replaced it.

Hour after hour he slept, but yet it seemed to him as though it were no time before he became conscious, first of some one shaking him and then of a voice saying—

"This is Edinburgh, sir."

"The deuce it is!" he exclaimed, suddenly wide awake,

and lost no time in leaving the compartment. A little porter, apparently at leisure, was standing with his back to him just outside.

"What platform does the train for Bartonsmuir start from?" he asked him laying his hand on his arm.

The little man started as though he had been shot.

"Bartonsmuir?" he said in a kind of hoarse whisper.

He was trembling like a leaf, too.

"Over there," he said pointing.

David turned, and when he looked round again the little man had disappeared.

"Another case of war-nerves," he said to himself. "They must be hard up here for porters."

He might well say so, for this particular little man was that day as incapable an official as could have been found in Great Britain. What work he managed to do was done in the intervals of running round and round in a frenzy of apprehension. For a dreadful rumour had filtered through to the station in the small hours of that morning that the next night a Zeppelin raid was expected which might affect, not only Edinburgh, but all the eastern counties.

As he heard the news, though he had expected it ever since he had left Bartonsmuir, the terror he had felt when he saw Albert in khaki returned to him in double measure, not because of the accomplice Albert had sent to Bartonsmuir—that move he believed he had already countered—but because of the man who, since Albert had left, had come to take his—Japps'—place at the West Lodge. He would not have felt so bad if he could only have been sure that Albert had done as he had promised to do, and removed those awful packing-cases marked "Explosives" from the dug-out. He had tried to be sure. He had forced himself to be sure. But now that the Zeppelin was actually coming he found himself woefully doubtful about it. On the other hand, he was quite sure that *if* Albert had failed him and *if* a bomb fell on the West Lodge while that man was in it he—Japp—would be a murderer and miserable for the rest

of his life, and that though he might never have to face the law for it or anything but his own conscience. This dreadful mentor, too, as though to drive him clean out of his senses, gradually assumed the form and lineaments of Miss Caroline, and as he went about trundling barrows and licking luggage-labels a vision of his old mistress's pale eyes watching him from between her pearl-tassels was never absent from him. No wonder then that he was startled out of his wits when David inquired for the Bartonsmuir platform. The wonder was, as he reflected afterwards, that he was able to point his finger in the right direction.

David felt like a new man after his long uninterrupted sleep. It was good to be away for a day. It would be good to see Ann. Since she was well and was there, nothing else could be of much consequence. These old women and their troubles and quarrels doubtless had been worrying her—she was such a sympathetic little soul—and that was why she had sent for him.

His anxieties dispersed by these cheerful reflections he spent the hours not unpleasantly until the time came for his train, and the afternoon found him in quite a holiday mood on the last stage of his journey.

At first the sun shone upon everything as though in sympathy with his good spirits, but presently as the train went further east and further east, a thin mist rose up from the sea and his thoughts, too, were obscured in a glamour of old memories.

Twenty springs had come and gone since he had passed that way before. It had been spring-time then, too. The daffodils had been blooming then as now. Sunshine and shadow had alternated on the green fields as hope and fear had alternated in his heart that day. It had been a slower train then, or it had seemed slower to his eagerness, and everywhere as he had passed along he had seemed to see Her to whom he was hastening. On the far slopes of the hills she had been, on the edges of the woodlands, under

the veils of living green among the grey stems of the beeches. He had seen her at every cottage door, riding up every stately avenue. And it was strange that even now after all those twenty years she seemed to be there again in her old haunts just as afore-time—she and not Ann—when it was Ann he was going to see. It was very disconcerting.

“Lottie, Lottie!” he said ruefully to himself as long ago he had often said it to her when she had been especially naughty. But he could not conjure her away out of the landscape. On she went before him always, till when the train slowed down at the last station before Bartonsmuir she seemed close and real as a living presence. Time here had stood still. The links, the sea, the sands were as they had been, and the sameness of everything made the coming meeting with Ann seem all at once somehow strange and impossible. How could he meet Ann here? It had been madness to think of coming. It would be like greeting this new love of his in the very presence of the old love.

Why had he not said that it was impossible for him to come? He could have begged Ann to come on a visit to the Atterburys. Why had he not thought of this? Then, at the Alum Bagh, perhaps, or on the beach, he might have forgotten again as on that first night of stress and storm, this lady of old years into whose domain he had returned so foolishly.

Now it was too late, however. Again the train was slowing down. Looking out he could see the familiar little old station-house with the clustering cottages of the village behind it.

And then, all at once, there was Ann herself. Ann, who in a moment thrust her shadowy rival into the background as she waited on the platform in her slim youth and beauty to welcome him.

Fred, looking on sullenly from outside the station barrier, saw the new-comer's face just then and turned his back sharply.

He had had to drive Ann to the station to meet this man, but at least he would not see her meet him. Ann had not guessed how many times on the way he had been on the point of springing down and imploring her to let him take her *anywhere* rather than to the railway station. Still less did he guess her thoughts. All he knew was that this man they were on their way to meet was to take her from him for ever and ever.

He was doing something to the machinery, which apparently required his whole attention, when David and Ann came down the path towards him.

"Conceited old ape!" he was saying to himself in unreasoning wrath at his rival's undeniably prepossessing appearance. He wrenched round the steering-wheel in a furious temper.

"Your driver's a bit reckless for your old ladies, is he not?" remarked David as the car swerved wildly on to the foot-path.

"Not usually," said Ann, "I never saw him drive like this before."

"It's just as well," said David as they started off again with a violent jerk.

Then recollection coming to him he looked keenly at Ann.

"Are they all well at Bartonsmuir, dear?" he said.

"Oh, yes," said Ann smiling up at him.

She at least evidently knew nothing of any mystery.

Yet—she had told him to come.

"And happy?" he asked again. "Are all your old ladies happy?"

"Oh, yes, the old dears," said Ann again, quite cheerfully. "I left them all waiting in state to receive you."

"Heaven help me!" he laughed. "Not *all* of them surely?"

"Every one of them," said Ann. "Even Miss Eldershaw, who was in bed all last week, has come down this afternoon for the occasion."

Miss Eldershaw! David was more and more puzzled.

One thing was clear, however—what Ann had asked him to come for had nothing to do with her old ladies. Here then was another mystery.

He put his arm round her and drew her close to him.

"And my little Ann—is she happy?" he asked then, watching her. There came then into the eyes looking up at him into his—he remembered it afterwards—a strange aloofness as though some spirit were confronting him. But the expression passed almost before he had remarked it.

"Yes, dear David, I am happy to see you," she said softly.

He noticed, however, that this time she did not smile.

"How am I ever to tell him?" she had begun saying to herself. All at once it seemed an impossible thing to do. It had seemed so much easier when she had written to him to come. It had seemed necessary then to see him before he was right away. She had not realised how difficult his presence would make everything. She had not thought before how heartless her action would appear to him. Now she saw how selfish it had been to bring him all the way from Lowhampton when he was already so over-driven. In spite of his gaiety and cheerfulness he looked much older she thought. The winter's work—so much harder than usual because so many doctors had been away—had told upon him. There were new lines and wrinkles about his mouth and eyes. The eyes, too, though keen as ever, looked tired nevertheless. Her own grew wistful as she looked at them. How kind were these eyes of his! How strong was the arm that held her! How safe and sheltered life would have been with this man! How she might have sheltered him, too, shared his troubles and joys, soothed his hours of weariness! Could she bear to say to him what she had to say? Could she bear to send him away from her for ever—to go out to die, perhaps, knowing that she had deserted him—had never loved him as he loved her? Would she be able to do it?

Then all at once as she looked at him it seemed to her that she was being unfair to him even now. It seemed

suddenly unbearable that they should appear together at Bartonsmuir before she had told him what she had to tell him. It seemed as though it would add hopelessly to her offence against him that she should allow this to happen. He at least must know at once. He must. As for the others they did not matter. But to him she owed it that she should speak now, should tell him—announce to him—

“David,” she said breathlessly.

They were passing the West Lodge already.

But he mistook her meaning.

“My little Ann,” he murmured remorsefully, for again at the well-known gate the girl of old years had met him and gone on before him up the old drive between the trees.

“My own little Ann,” he repeated drawing her once more closer to him.

She could find no more words then, and they sat side by side till they arrived with silence still between them.

All the Wrack-straws, as Ann had said, were assembled in the hall to receive them.

“Though in my opinion it is quite absurd,” Mrs. Fennimore remarked to Mrs. Dodsworth where they sat withdrawn from the delighted circle surrounding The Engaged Couple, as Mrs. Pitmirran called them. “Miss Charteris is quite conceited enough already without having all this fuss made about her.”

“But it’s not all about her, it’s about the doctor, too,” replied Mrs. Dodsworth. “He is a very old friend of Miss Caroline’s and he is going immediately abroad on active service. You must admit besides that Miss Charteris—if she *is* conceited—has some cause for it. Dr. Warren when he was young must have been almost as handsome as the other one.”

“As the other one? What do you mean?” said Mrs. Fennimore, who was inclined to be captious that afternoon, for Sir Joseph Bird, the oracle of Scotland Yard, had not yet made his appearance, though, according to Mrs. Dods-

worth who had received a letter from him, he might be expected any moment.

"Why Green, of course," said Mrs. Dodsworth. "Don't you see he adores the ground she treads on?"

"He'd much better attend to the ground he is in charge of," snapped Mrs. Fennimore. "The weeds on the East Drive are simply scandalous."

"Which is Miss Eldershaw?" said David to Ann under cover of the buzz of talk. "I should like to be introduced to her."

"And I shall be very pleased to make your acquaintance, doctor," said a gracious voice quite close behind him.

Turning, he saw seated in a high-backed chair the old lady who had created so much disturbance.

Whatever had been the matter with her she was perfectly well now. Never indeed had Miss Eldershaw been in better spirits. She was in the enjoyment of her very first adventure. She was being daring and defiant to people. She had defied Mrs. Dodsworth and Mr. Tosh too as they very soon would find out. She had had a long talk with Miss Caroline that morning and Miss Caroline had told her that her action in telling her all in spite of everybody had probably saved the household from disaster. Now all would be well, for as soon as Doctor Warren was gone, steps would be taken. Miss Caroline had also assumed responsibility for her valuables and locked them all up for her in her own room, and unknown to Miss Eldershaw, who might have resented it, she had taken the Bow's Liniment too and locked it up.

Relieved thus of her treasures and her worries at the same time Miss Eldershaw was easily persuaded to rise and come downstairs again, where she sat chuckling occasionally so softly that no one heard her, and smiling now and then at nothing in particular.

All the Wrack-straws were already dressed for dinner.

"You see, doctor," Mrs. Bellairs explained, "we naturally wanted to see as much of you as we could, and Miss

Charteris had informed us that after dinner she was going to take you away with her for a walk."

Ann laughed a little as in duty bound, but her heart sank as she heard the words. She had been thinking that after all she need say nothing that night. But if she went for this walk with David she must speak. Well, after all, perhaps the sooner the better. She would not be able to see his face so well now. In the daytime all these sorrowful little lines and wrinkles would be sure to take the courage out of her.

She slipped aside for a moment to one of the windows and looked out. There was a flush of sunset still behind the woods. The storm which had raged round the house for many days had sunk into a little fitful sobbing. The sea as though weary of its roaring was now merely whispering in the distance. Everything to Ann in her nervousness seemed waiting for her disclosure. She turned her back on it all again and found Mrs. Bellairs approaching her.

"Well, now, aren't you grateful to me, my dear?" she said. "If I hadn't taken the evening in hand and made Caroline and the rest of 'em dress before tea you and your man would have had to stay in till prayers and bore yourselves being sociable to us."

"You have been very good," said Ann, laughing again in spite of herself.

But the gong sounding just then was as the trump of doom to her.

Mrs. Bellairs it seemed had taken the dinner also in hand. The table looked bridal. There were white flowers everywhere. There were little white bouquets in each of the elaborately folded table-napkins. The soup had little hearts in it cut out of carrot and turnip. The tart too was an open fruit one bestrewn with more little hearts in pastry.

The late Mr. Barton's oldest Burgundy graced the feast and there was champagne also. At dessert, after Miss

Caroline in a short speech had welcomed the guest, Mr. Tosh in his happiest vein proposed the health of The Engaged Couple. Even Mrs. Fennimore brightened towards the close of the entertainment, and when Miss Gellatly, responding to a unanimous call, sang one of her ballads without accompaniment, she was seen to applaud quite heartily. Mrs. Dodsworth on Mr. Tosh's right, to the huge delight of that old gentleman, clinked glasses with him and even exchanged bouquets with him. Miss Eldershaw on his left actually made two jokes. Mr. Tosh, however, though he laughed politely, eyed her the while very much askance.

"Whatever is she up to now?" he said to himself. "I had better tell Lorimer as soon as possible that she's downstairs again."

After dinner accordingly, when the hall was quite clear, he went during one of his dummy hands to the telephone and rang up the West Lodge. No answer came from the West Lodge, however, though he rang again and again and yet again.

By this time David and Ann had crossed the moor and were following the broad sandy path that led winding through the dunes.

The moon had set now behind the woods, but the twilight still lingered and the stars were very bright.

Ann, looking up at them all in a tremor at what was before her, was steadied and calmed as she looked up at them. The thought came to her that even then other lovers beyond that still grey water were seeing them through blood and tears as they fought for their loves, giving up their very lives for them. How could she then hesitate to go forward now even if, for her love's sake, she must sacrifice this dear friendship?

Yet it was hard—very hard.

"David," she said, and her voice sounded unnaturally loud to herself, though in reality it was little above a whisper. "David dear, I have something to say to you."

"Yes, Ann," he said quietly.

By tacit consent they both stopped short and faced each other in the dimness.

"Go on, dear," he said after a moment, laying his hands on her shoulders as she stood like a child looking up at him. "Tell everything thoroughly up, as my old nurse used to say."

Then as though the touch of his hands, bringing with it a passion of sorrow for him, yet compelled her—

"It's—it's that I can't help it, David," she burst out. "But I can't be your wife ever. I can never marry you."

The grasp on her shoulders tightened for a moment, but there was silence save for the sea's faint sighing and the wind whispering in the withered grasses.

"I—I didn't know," she went on desperately. "I thought I could at first—and I *do* love you," she burst out again, "but not in that way. I did not know then—when I said I would marry you—what—that way—was. Now——" her voice failed her for a moment as realisation surged in upon her, but she went on bravely, "now I *do* know."

"But, my dear——" he began, moved to the depths as he listened to her.

"Don't speak yet," she begged him. "I want to say how thankful I am to you, how—how happy I have been with you, and how s—sorry I am to go out of your life. Oh, I can never thank you enough. I have felt so safe—so—so blessed with you. But it has not been love—not this that I know now. . . . This love is a cruel thing. It makes you go out from all the safety and the shelter and leave things behind that it is hard to leave. And don't think," she hurried on eagerly, "that I am leaving you to marry anybody else. I shall never marry. . . . There now, that's all."

"But it's *not* all," said David immediately, "not nearly all."

And then in a moment she found herself in his arms again with her head on his breast as though nothing whatever had

happened. It was impossible as a dream and yet like a dream too wonderfully natural.

"Not all?" she whispered bewildered.

"No, little one," he said. "For I have something to tell you too, and it is that you have not only done the brave straight thing as you always do, but the thing—" he paused for moment—"that you will never regret, never be sorry for doing as long as you live, child."

Again he paused, and Ann holding her breath to listen for his next words could feel the throb of his quickened heart-beats.

"I know," he went on after a moment, "twenty years ago and more I came to know what you have called the cruel love, Ann dear, and though you are to me what no one else has ever been, I know now, though, more shame to me, I would have hidden it from you, that nothing can ever change or kill that other love."

"David," cried the girl turning to face him again eagerly. "Oh, David, is this true?"

"God knows it is," he whispered, "and cruel as it is, thank God that you know it too."

They stood silent then for a long moment.

"And thank God," he added, "for your fine courage."

"Oh, but I was afraid!" exclaimed Ann, with a breath of relief, "I thought it would be all over between us."

"And so it is," he laughed as he drew her arm through his, "but something far better has begun between us, Ann dear."

They left the path then and the whispering grasses and for long and long they paced up and down the sands talking, for the first time in their intercourse soul meeting soul though no word more was spoken of these other loves of theirs.

At last with compunction Ann came to a standstill.

"Oh, what time is it?" she said. "We must get back for prayers. The poor old dears will be so disappointed if we aren't there."

"What will they say," laughed David, as they scrambled on to the path again, "when they hear that after all we are not an 'Engaged Couple'?"

"Don't let's say anything," said Ann. "It will be easier to tell them after you have gone away again."

They sat side by side, therefore, at prayers as they were expected to do.

"And really seem devoted to each other," said Mrs. Bellairs to herself afterwards. "Poor Fred. No wonder he hasn't put in an appearance to-night. Whatever will he do now? Give up the place I suppose."

"Where is Green, to-night?" said Miss Caroline when the household was dispersing.

"I am just going to see where he is, Miss Caroline," said Mr. Tosh who was standing coated, muffled, and hat in hand watching David light his lantern for him.

"Oh, indeed?" said Miss Caroline coldly, for she was not over-pleased with Mr. Tosh that evening.

"Can't I go for you, sir?" said David.

"Thank you. No, sir. Certainly not," said Mr. Tosh.

Mrs. Bellairs remained behind after every one else had gone upstairs. There was a glorious fire in the hall and to leave it would have been a waste. She was depressed besides about Fred and his unhappy love affair, and she was worried about the morrow's conference. The more she considered the latter the less she thought of it. The only person she was convinced who would benefit by it was the criminal.

"It's just like Caroline, of course, to think that the jewels will be put back," she said to herself. "All the same it's unbusinesslike to be so optimistic."

She wished now she had not promised to say nothing to David about it.

"I am always promising things," she mourned, "that I would be better not to promise."

The thought of David, too, recalled other things—Lottie

Alleyne and this and that—and past days, and half-forgotten dreams. So twiddling her rings pensively she sat on, feeling low-spirited and altogether on the shelf.

Outside it was very quiet, and gradually as she sat thinking of it the quietness seemed to steal in and upstairs and along the passages till the only sound to be heard besides the drowsy crackling of the fire was the big eight-day clock ticking. . . . But it ticked and ticked. . . . Then words seemed to fit themselves to it. A verse of the ballad that Miss Gellatly had sung after dinner. She could not help saying it again and again and again to that monotonous accompaniment.

“And she rade on, and on she rade,
All by the licht o’ the moon,
Until she cam’ to the wan water
And there she lichtit doon.”

Over and over Mrs. Bellairs said these words to oblige the ancient timepiece.

“Bother the thing,” she said at last. “I can’t stand this. Sleep or no sleep I must go to bed.”

She had risen stiffly and was adjusting her rheumatic knee, which felt out of joint, preparatory to going upstairs when suddenly, without warning, the heavy stillness was broken by a knock on the outer door—very light, but very distinct.

Now that every evening Miss Gellatly had been telling stories of warnings and spirit-rappings which she had heard from intimate friends upon whose veracity she could rely.

Consequently Mrs. Bellairs could not bring herself to move until the knock had been twice repeated. Then however—

“It would be a strange thing,” she admonished herself, “if you couldn’t face a ghost yet.”

And resolutely she limped forward, drew the bolt, undid the chain, then after a slight pause turned the handle of the door, and opened it.

She fully expected to see nothing at all. Neither did she

at first, being still dazzled by the lamplight. But immediately out of the darkness came a cry of delight—

"Aunt Maud!"

"*Lottie!*" she ejaculated, and flung herself open-armed upon the visitant.

"You see," said Mrs. Alleyne when she had finished all the biscuits and milk, had refused anything more to eat, and had been permitted to have a cigarette, "you see they are expecting a Zeppelin raid and the train was held up for hours and hours at Briars Junction."

"A Zeppelin raid? *Here?*" exclaimed Mrs. Bellairs.

Lottie shrugged her shoulders.

"One can never tell," she said. "But your station-master is a perfect duck, and rather than disturb you all by ringing up so late he said he would drive me to the gate in the luggage-cart."

Mrs. Bellairs laughed.

"Same old Lottie," she said. "Always getting round the men. Crombie is as a rule anything but a duck. On the contrary, he is celebrated for his bad temper. But tell me more about this Zeppelin raid."

"I can't," said Lottie, "because it hasn't come off yet. And don't let us talk of Zepps. Tell me rather how you all are."

"Oh, we're all well—so far," said Mrs. Bellairs.

"Is Miss Eldershaw well?" said Lottie next.

Mrs. Bellairs raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips.

"Yes. Come along, Aunt Maud. Out with it!" said Lottie laughing.

"I see you have heard something," said Mrs. Bellairs.

"Miss Eldershaw is well *now*. But, Lottie my dear——"

Then she told her all about the theft of the Napoleonic heirloom. "For I didn't promise not to tell Lottie," she reflected. "Though it's a wonder I didn't." And she delighted in telling it.

When she had finished all she had to tell, Lottie in her

turn told her story. She gave a full account of the loss of the emerald rings and of Piffard's previous acquaintance with Albert. This last shocked her listener into temporary breathlessness. When she came to Fred's part in the affair, however, Mrs. Bellairs heaved a sigh of relief.

"So that was why, and I was quite wrong," she said incomprehensibly. "And he is quite happy after all then—poor Fred."

"*Poor* Fred?" said Lottie, wondering. "I should think he would be as happy as a king. In his last letter he told us that now he knew who the thief was and that to obtain clear proof would only be a matter of days. I am dying to see him and hear all about it, but when I called at the West Lodge on my way here it was all shut up, and though I knocked and knocked I could get no answer. The air here must be doing him good. He didn't sleep so soundly as that at Rathness."

"Well, I am glad," said Mrs. Bellairs. "I was miserable before you came in thinking he would be disappointed."

"But you didn't know about it before I came in," said Lottie surprised.

"Oh, no—of course I didn't," said Mrs. Bellairs. "I forgot that."

Lottie regarded her for a moment in silence, but could make nothing of this last speech.

"Poor Aunt Maud," she said to herself at last. "She is getting decidedly older."

"Well now—but about the conference," she said aloud to change the subject. "Every one will be suspecting every one else of course now it's over."

"But it's not over," said Mrs. Bellairs.

"Not over?" exclaimed Lottie. "But it's not like Aunt Caroline to let things hang fire like this—to let whole days pass——"

"Well, you see," said Mrs. Bellairs, "it was all arranged for to-night when we heard this morning that a visitor was coming."

"Another Wrack-straw? I see," said Lottie and her tone was a trifle contemptuous.

"Not a bit of it," said Mrs. Bellairs with spirit. "It is no more a Wrack-straw than you are yourself. It is a man who is going abroad immediately on active service. It is David Warren from Lowhampton, Lottie—here for the first time since—well *you* know best."

For a moment there was silence while Lottie held her cigarette suspended.

"David Warren?" she said, then in an incredulous half-whisper, "Going on active service—and here in this house—now?"

"Here," said Mrs. Bellairs, "on a farewell visit to his fiancée. He leaves again to-morrow. So you can understand——"

Lottie flicked the ash off the end of her cigarette.

"I understand," she replied with elaborate indifference. "His visit has occurred a little awkwardly."

"It has," said Mrs. Bellairs in the same tone and looking at the fire. "It was a pity about the conference."

She sat on then in silent immovability with a curious expression staring steadily at the glowing embers.

She was not in the least surprised, however, though she pretended to be, when Lottie said—

"Stop being an Egyptian sphinx, Aunt Maud, and tell me—is he much altered?"

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH

IN WHICH GREEN SPENDS A PROFITABLE EVENING AND MRS.
DODSWORTH SUFFERS FROM OVER-FATIGUE BEFORE
BREAKFAST

Now, though Mrs. Bellairs thought it a natural thing that Fred should absent himself from prayers that night, it was as a matter of fact the last thing that Fred would have done on the occasion of the presence of his triumphant rival. He arrived home from the station in a wrathful and defiant mood which made him for the time being angry even with Ann, and determined to show her as well as everybody else that her engagement to another man was of no moment to him.

Accordingly, after cleaning his motor and housing it for the night, he made for the herb-garden and dug there until it was too dark to dig any more. Then shouldering his spade he went home to the West Lodge just as at the Big House they were nearing the end of the Betrothal Dinner. He could hear it proceeding as he passed outside in the twilight. A great clapping of hands was going on and the whole company seemed to be laughing and chattering.

"Poultry-yard!" he muttered contemptuously as he strode past the open windows.

Just then a sudden silence supervened and Miss Gellatly began her ballad—

"Lady Margaret sat at her bower door
Sewing her silken seam. . . ."

"Bah!" he exclaimed and began singing, "Where the wind blows we go," to drown the sound of that other singing.

Never had the West Lodge been more congenial to him than on that night. The storm of the days before had left its marks upon it. Greenery hung down in strips off the

walls. Part of the wooden fence had collapsed. A fallen branch lay across the flower-bed. In the dim light it looked he thought as dejected and neglected as he was himself. He had no desire, however, to set it to rights again. He let the branch lie. He left the fence as it was. With grim satisfaction he pushed back without tying it up a trail of ivy that was dangling right in the middle of the door-way. It swung back into its place again as the door banged behind him.

Inside the house also confusion prevailed. He had dressed in a hurry. Clothes lay here, there, and everywhere. Yet after he had washed and changed he tidied up nothing, but sat smoking and watching the clock rather pleased, such was his deplorable mood, that one of his hair-brushes was lost and one of his dirty collars on the mantelpiece.

Quite a long time passed while he sat on in brooding silence. Nine struck—half-past nine—then he watched the minute-hand move on to the three-quarters.

"When it gets to eighteen minutes to——" he was just saying to himself, when suddenly the telephone bell rang.

It may have been telepathy—who knows? The desire of the little man at the other end of the wire may have been so strong as to penetrate to his perception. Certain it is that before he had even received the peremptory order to speak to Edinburgh, he was sure that it was again the unknown informer who wanted to communicate with him.

He smiled when the weak voice began as before.

"Is that Bartonsmuir? Are you the chauffeur? At the West Lodge?"

"Yes, yes, yes," answered Fred.

"Then be warned," said the voice emphatically. "There may be a raid to-night or to-morrow night—a Zeppelin raid. On no account sleep in the West Lodge. It's dangerous there. Do you understand? It's dangerous."

Fred laughed.

"What do you know about the West Lodge?" he said.

"Enough to keep me from sleeping myself if you don't promise to keep clear of it," said the voice.

"Oh, rot!" said Fred. "Tell me why and then perhaps——"

"I dare not tell you why," said the voice breathlessly.

"Then nothing will induce me to run away," said Fred.

"Of that you may rest assured."

And with that he rang off.

At the same moment, however, his heart began to beat a little faster. Was there danger then—really danger at the West Lodge?

The thought exhilarated and revived him strangely. Never, he realised, had he been so reckless of risk as on that particular evening.

What could the man have meant? Explosives?

The thought thrilled him with the once familiar thrill of the trenches. If that was it—explosives hidden somewhere about the house—a mine that a bomb falling from a Zeppelin might blow up—he laughed a little as he thought of the tremor in the warning voice. Ten to one—a hundred to one—no Zeppelin would pass that way, and if it did no bomb would fall from it on this particular spot. Why should it? Yet the fear of it had served its turn. It had given an enemy secret away and into hands fortunately trained to deal with it. He wished he could ring up the owner of the trembling voice and tell him who he was and how much he was enjoying himself.

But even if he could have done so, he could not have spared the time. He was eager to find whatever there was to be found. With the quickened perception that he had acquired on outpost duty he looked curiously round the homely room. Then taking up the poker which was the nearest implement handy he began tapping carefully all over the wall above the fireplace.

His practised ear could detect nothing abnormal there. The little old house was solidly built of stone and the walls were overlaid with plaster. Systematically, however, he

went over all the walls, then after that the walls of the other two rooms.

"Nothing there," he said to himself at last. Then returning to the kitchen and displacing the furniture as he moved round he began very carefully to examine the flooring.

When he came to the fireplace he sat up to consider for a moment. So far it had seemed as though he were looking for a mare's nest. But the more he thought of the warning the more sure he was that it was genuine. No one otherwise surely at that hour of the night would have been at the trouble and expense of telephoning. There had been real anxiety in the voice, too.

He moved along again gradually testing every plank as he went.

Nothing could he find, however, till he came to the great dresser when, looking closely at the floor near it, he noticed for the first time that the planking there was faintly scored with marks as though small indiarubber-covered wheels had passed many times over it.

"And, by Jove, the thing *is* on wheels," he exclaimed aloud as he looked more closely at it. They were concealed by the overhanging wood-work which made the dresser seem as immovable as the Great Pyramid. At a slight pull, however, for Jane had left it unfastened, it moved out at right angles from the wall smoothly and silently as though it were quite used to it. . . . And there underneath——

With a smothered exclamation he fetched the lamp from the table.

"By George, this is *some* dug-out," he muttered, and a moment later he was at the bottom of the ladder inspecting the walls built up of petrol tins.

"So these are the reason why my good friend could not sleep," he said.

He was still smiling at the thought of any one not sleeping because of a few petrol tins and a problematical Zeppelin when looking down he saw the packing-cases marked "Explosives. To be handled with the Utmost Caution."

"So it isn't only petrol!" he muttered.

Nor was it only bombs.

"Well, I'm blest!" he ejaculated a moment later, for the sandy floor was all trodden over with footprints—and apparently new footprints, too. Quite a number of people seemed to have come down the ladder and turned to the right there. Then looking to the right himself his eye fell upon a gap in the wall of petrol tins, an oblong of darkness just high and wide enough to allow a full-grown man to pass through it. Next moment he had entered the passage on the track of the mysterious footprints.

"I seem to have been living on the Grand Trunk Road without knowing it," he soliloquised.

After all, however, he reflected, the footsteps might date from some long past day, and he had concluded that this must be so when suddenly, after what seemed an age of plunging through soft sand, he came to a turning in the passage. Hardly had he rounded the corner when he stumbled and almost fell over something large and solid, and recovering himself he found a new suit-case lying before him with the key sticking in it.

It was the Mecca of the pilgrimage it seemed. The track stopped there, and in a moment Fred had set down his lamp, turned the key in the lock, and thrown back the lid.

He could see nothing but newspapers at first, but after he had burrowed for a little all kinds of things emerged, spoons, forks, a sapphire necklace. . . .

Then all at once the truth dawned upon him.

"By Jove, it's *her*!" he exclaimed.

He would have danced a war-dance if there had been room to do it in. He went on burrowing instead.

That suit-case was a marvel. In one corner was an assortment of fine old silver with the Barton crest upon it. In another was a heap of jewels. Rubies were there, pearls, diamonds, emeralds, and they were all in the quaintest settings.

"The lady has good taste," thought Fred. "She has chosen the very pick of everything."

She had evidently not finished choosing either. A space was left still clear.

"The greedy little fool," he said to himself. "She might have slipped through our fingers. Now she has delivered herself into our hands. We can cut her off as neatly as ever any one was cut off."

Laying down the suit-case again and taking up the flaring lamp he went forward and soon came to the outer end of the passage which at this point was little bigger than the entrance to a good-sized rabbit-hole. It had probably been a rabbit-hole at one time. There were other rabbit-holes all about. The tunnel here had passed under a warren, cutting through dozens of little passages. The roof of it was dotted all over with tiny dark entries leading presumably by tortuous ways to the outer air.

"So she'll be able to breathe all right," he said to himself. "The place is simply made for it."

Through the fragrant whin-bush he could see the dark outlines of the dunes against the sky and the pale gleam of the sea beyond them. All round were tufts of grass and patches of bare sand, ghostly white in the starlight. Down on the beach not many yards away he might have seen Ann and David walking together. He had no time to look at the sea that night however, and he had determined to think no more of Ann.

With one glance round, therefore, he withdrew again into the passage and without a moment's hesitation made again for the dug-out. A minute more landed him in his room which he closed up as though for the night, locking the door carefully and barring the shutters across the window.

A few minutes sufficed for this. Then snatching up the spade from the corner where he had flung it that evening, he went back the way he had come and soon reached the turning. A little beyond it he came upon the suit-case again, but stepping past it this time he went on to just within the

outer opening. Then setting down the lamp and stripping off his coat, he seized the spade and began filling up the passage.

A long time had passed, the lamp was emitting more smell than light, when, with about twelve feet of solid sand between it and the exit, he left the treasure-trove as nearly as possible where he had found it and went back the way he had come in triumph. In the West Lodge again he replaced the dresser, made himself some supper, and ate it with great satisfaction. Then flinging himself dressed as he was upon his bed, he slept as he had not slept since Ypres.

At six o'clock in the morning, however, he awoke as usual, and was starting for the motor-house when a sheet of paper caught his eye. It had been torn from a note-book and thrust under the outer door.

"Miss Eldershaw is downstairs this evening," it ran. "Be on the alert. *She* is.—Tosh."

He decided then to see Mr. Tosh at once, reflecting that it was very unlikely that his prey would appear before his usual hour for being absent.

Fastened with drawing-pins on the closed door of the East Lodge, however, he found a notice written on a sheet of foolscap.

"Mr. Tosh, having been prevented from retiring to bed until a late hour last night, desires to be left this morning undisturbed. When he wants breakfast he will telephone."

"Good," said Fred.

Then he tore a leaf from his pocket-book and standing upon the door-step he wrote—

"Dear Mr. Tosh,—I have her. There will be no need for you to keep watch to-day. Only don't allow an alarm to be raised if I go a-missing for a time. I fully expect before long to have news for you.—F. L."

He folded this up and pushed it under the door. Then he went home and had a good breakfast, during which he wrote another notice, "Will be back in an hour," which he fastened to his own door.

After this, leaving everything invitingly open, he locked himself into his inner room, where he lay down on the bed with his lamp beside him and *The Thirty-nine Steps* in his hand to await events.

Meantime, things had been happening elsewhere. There had been another witness besides Mrs. Bellairs to the arrival of Mrs. Alleyne the night before.

As the time approached for making her exit from Bartons-muir, Jane had been sleeping less and less. All now depended upon her choice of the right moment for Mrs. Dodsworth to disappear from off the face of the earth. All the spoil was now in the dug-out and considering everything it had been wonderfully easy to collect. She had gone out every day for her morning walk and entered by the West Lodge while Green was valeting. She had left the dresser unfastened and ready to move at any moment. She was very quick and neat-handed and her expeditions had taken wonderfully little time. But she laughed as she thought of some of the hairbreadth escapes she had had. Once Fred had come back for his cigarettes while she was still on the ladder underneath the dresser.

"Bert would have been furious if he had known," she said to herself. "But you can risk anything among such a set of fools as they are here."

For Fred she considered now also a fool. He had come here to court Ann Charteris. That was evident. But he had taken a queer way of doing it, acting as a servant, concealing his name and rank and, stupidest of all with such a young woman as Ann, his military glory and distinction. Could he not see that Ann was mad on patriotism and courage and fighting and so on? Yet here he was planting herbs and driving motors and playing the valet. No wonder the old doctor had won her.

She, Jane, would have been a fool herself if she had allowed him to intimidate her. All the same things had not gone quite as she had intended they should. It was true that

she had already quite a good store of Honeycomb, but Miss Eldershaw puzzled her and her manner at times was a little unnerving. It was so different to what she had expected. She seemed to have lost her grip on her, and all the bother she had had with her had been for nothing—nothing at all—not even the great-aunt's silver thimble.

Mrs. Fennimore, too, was becoming very troublesome and threatening to write herself to Scotland Yard.

Mrs. Bellairs, who certainly had seemed as though she would be an easy prey, had secreted everything of hers somewhere except the rings which she apparently never took off.

Miss Gellatly, who would have been mere child's play because she was so absent-minded, had nothing worth the taking. Nor had Miss Emily.

Mrs. Pitmirran she was keeping to the last. For the final setting of the diamond sun which rose regularly every evening must be followed immediately by her own departure.

Had the last come now? That was the crucial question. Miss Caroline had certainly looked at her during the Betrothal Dinner a good deal more than usual. But that might have been because she was flirting with Mr. Tosh and not because anything abnormal had been discovered in the silver pantry.

"It's never too late for them to be jealous of course," she said to reassure herself.

Nevertheless, something in Miss Caroline's aspect troubled her, and she was lying awake on the night of the dinner-party wondering whether she could risk another night at Bartonsmuir.

Thus it was that though Mrs. Alleyne's arrival was so unobtrusive that no one else in the house heard it, Jane was immediately on the alert, and every new occurrence appearing to her just then in the light of a new danger, she decided that she must see who this midnight visitor was.

As she slipped on her dressing-gown uncomfortable

memories of Mrs. Fennimore's threats to write to Scotland Yard crossed her mind. Had the old lady already written she wondered. Her manner that afternoon had been rather strange.

At this thought, however, just as Fred had done at the thought of danger, Jane felt the spirit of defiance and venturesomeness arise within her. Before her slippers were on her feet, she felt better than she had done for days.

"Whoever it is will find his match anyhow," she said to herself as she stepped lightly along the passage.

But at the top of the stairs she came to a sudden standstill, and her heart within her seemed to pause too for a moment, for she could see the hall fire very well from where she stood and on the rug before it, laughing and talking to Mrs. Bellairs, was Mrs. Alleyne from The Gables, her former mistress.

Jane would rather have seen the man from Scotland Yard. Whatever had Mrs. Alleyne come about?

She had not been a maid for a month at The Gables without acquiring a high regard for the astuteness of its mistress, and without being aware that it could be no light reason that had brought her here from Rathness out of the midst of a thousand urgent duties. Did Mrs. Alleyne know that she was here? Had Mrs. Fennimore by some means got at Piffard? Was the lady of The Gables merely waiting till the morning to denounce her? In any case she was convinced that Mrs. Alleyne's quick eyes had only to look at her to recognise her.

Well, that decided it anyhow, thank goodness. She—Jane—must not wait. What she had still to do must be done now. As Albert said it was always best to be on the safe side. The safe side here clearly would not be to meet Mrs. Alleyne.

As she thus pondered, leaning over the bannister and seeing how unconscious of her presence the two at the hall fire were, the spirit of bravado rose higher and higher in Jane. She leaned over still further to listen to what they were saying.

They were sitting close together now and talking.

At first she could only hear a word here and there. Presently, however, Mrs. Alleyne in the excitement of her narrative raised her voice for a moment.

"We believe it to be the same person," she said, "or some woman friend of his. Captain Piffard——"

The rest was inaudible, but this was quite enough.

"Oh, do you?" Jane muttered mockingly. "Well, catch her if you can then," and moving rapidly along the landing she gently opened a bedroom door and walked in swiftly and softly.

"Who's that?" said Mrs. Pitmirran.

And by the dim rays of the night-light Jane could see her sit up in bed. But she was prepared for this.

"It's only me," she said. "I couldn't sleep, Mrs. Pitmirran. Something I heard yesterday was oppressing me, and I felt as though I must come and warn you. Beware of Mrs. Fennimore. She is no true friend to you."

"What?" said Mrs. Pitmirran.

Jane repeated her last two sentences more emphatically, adding what Mrs. Fennimore had said, improved upon and extended.

All the while, as though to support herself during this trying duty, she was leaning back against the dressing-table.

"I am sorry to have to tell you this, Mrs. Pitmirran," she concluded at last, "but I could not sleep until I had told you."

"You are very kind," said Mrs. Pitmirran drily, "but since you are so distressed I may as well tell you—I don't care that—" here she snapped her fingers—"for Sophia Fennimore. And you may tell her from me that if it gives her any pleasure she may call me names to her heart's content, for what a dressed-up broomstick like her says is all one to Bethia Pitmirran."

With that Mrs. Pitmirran adjusted her pillows, placed her head once more upon them, and turning her back upon her

detractor and her visitor at the same time was in a moment either snoring or pretending to be snoring.

Regaining her own room Jane gave herself one moment to look at something very bright and shining that she had clutched in her hand all the way from Mrs. Pitmirran's room. Only one moment she gloated over it, however, the next she hung it round her neck. Then dressing herself completely she put on her night-dress over everything and was apparently sleeping soundly when the maid in the morning came to wake her.

No one in the house was more wide awake than she however. She must take the first chance of the Lodge being unoccupied. Once down in the dug-out all would be plain sailing. The crossing of the moor would be the only bother, but even that would be a trifle for she would no longer be Mrs. Dodsworth. That lady's long tiresome garments would be left in the tunnel. She had everything there already that she needed, from a neat short skirt to a box of ginger-nuts.

Her mind made up she was all impatience. She could not wait till the time for her constitutional. But no one noticed that she went out on to the lawn three-quarters of an hour earlier than usual.

It was a beautiful morning, one of the first of the summer, but like Fred she had no eye for scenery just then. Hovering round the West Lodge on the look-out for his departure, however, she did notice on the door the patch of white paper.

She went forward as though in passing to examine it.

"Will be back in an hour," she read.

Luck! Mr. Lorimer was out, more than half an hour before his usual time. But when had he gone? the hour might be nearly up already. No time was to be lost therefore.

Both doors were open. To move the dresser, light the candle, and descend with it into the dug-out was the work of two or three minutes.

With a sense of elation she turned into the passage. It

was for the last time and she was glad of it. She had had enough of Bartonsmuir, enough, not so much of the risks and dangers—these she had enjoyed—but enough of posing as a Wrack-straw. Ah! It would be good to put on pretty clothes and flit away from it all to be young and jolly again.

"Though now I am more like an earth-worm than anything else," she said to herself as she made her way with moderated pace along the narrow tunnel.

This thought of being an earth-worm oppressed her. The air seemed thicker, heavier than usual, and there was a smell of petrol she had never noticed before, for Fred's lamp had been smoking badly. Her feet seemed to sink deeper and deeper at every step, but she pressed on as quickly as she could to the turning. Round it would be fresh air and light and fragrance. Just before she reached it, however, she had to pause for a moment panting, and then another unusual thing struck her.

The sea should be audible here. Even on calm days the familiar rushing sound was never absent. To-day all was heavy silence, as of the grave, unbroken, absolute. In spite of herself the impressionable Jane felt the excitement and enterprise oozing out of her, and in an impulse to escape from the feeling of being buried alive that was beginning to possess her and make her want to scream she hurried on again faster than ever.

At the corner she raised her hand mechanically to shelter her candle which more than once before had been blown out there by the draught. But to her surprise there was no draught when she turned the corner—only the same heavy airlessness. There was no twilight either on ahead to show where the passage ended. Only darkness still as of midnight.

She went forward as in a nightmare, hardly noticing the suit-case which lay as she had left it a few feet further on. She was staring beyond it at something inexplicable and terrifying. Then, not believing her eyes, she moved forward and touched it. Yes, there was no doubt about it, it was sand. Sand in barrow-loads. Sand from floor to

ceiling. She was buried there sure enough. The roof of the passage just within the entrance must have fallen in.

She stood quite still for a moment steadying her shaken nerves. After all what was more natural? She had noticed before that the whole roof here was riddled with rabbit-holes—then the storm of the last few days—the high tide—there were a hundred causes for it.

And that was the way with Nature, too, always to be utterly indifferent to little human arrangements.

So Nature had closed up her exit—the way out that Albert had thought so safe. She laughed as she thought of that. She imagined Albert in her position. He would have sweated with fear. As for her she was quite cool. She would merely change her clothes now and take the suit-case out the other way by the West Lodge. She was glad to find that she was able to reflect calmly.

There would be plenty of time if that notice—"Will be back in an hour"—had been posted just before she saw it. Even if not, even if Mr. Lorimer had returned, she could reconnoitre from beneath the dresser as she had often done before and choose her own time to take her departure. Only let her keep her head and all would be well yet. Quarter of an hour would bring her safely with her booty to a place in the wood she knew where she could wait till evening. Then after night-fall she could make her way to Ferlie Station three miles away from Bartonsmuir. There she could await the next train to Edinburgh. . . . Only let her keep her head. . . .

These thoughts in her mind, she had stooped to move the suit-case out of her way with her right hand, holding her candle in her left, when suddenly she stiffened in that attitude as though transfixed and with an expression on her face such as Robinson Crusoe might have had. For there by the light of the candle she could see on the fresh sand with which the floor was sprinkled, not one footprint, but a dozen at least—footprints not her own, but made by a big man's hobnailed boots. Turning slowly as

though against her will she looked again at the fallen sand-heap. Then she clenched her free hand.

"Damn him!" she whispered between her teeth. "He has found my hiding-place whoever he is!"

Yet he had left the suit-case. Breathlessly she flung it open. No, it was not empty. Everything was there as she had packed it. But kneeling beside it the truth dawned upon her and she felt suddenly cold.

It was not an accident that the roof of the passage had fallen in. It was a trap and she was in it—she and her stolen goods. For a moment she felt paralysed. There was only one way out. Like a frantic thing she rushed to the barrier and began digging at it with her hands.

A moment later, however, she sat up.

The crash of something metallic falling had suddenly echoed through the heavy stillness.

She rose to her feet, finding to her surprise that all in a moment she had regained her coolness. Her former elation of spirit indeed had returned to her in double measure. She knew the worst now. Everything was perfectly clear. The game was before her. It remained but to play it.

"Ah, you think yourself very clever, don't you?" she muttered. "But you'll find that I am cleverer—much cleverer."

She stood back against the wall quite near the corner holding the lighted candle in her right hand.

Only once she looked regretfully at the suit-case.

"But it's no use," she said to herself. "I couldn't do it."

"And I have this," she added. "That is worth them all."

She patted as she spoke Mrs. Pitmirran's diamond sun now eclipsed for the moment under her black brocade bodice.

A queer figure she looked in the wavering candle-light, her bonnet on the back of her head, her white curls powdered with sand, her small white teeth set firmly in her lower lip, her black eyes flashing, her head on one side listening.

She had need to listen for after the first crash there were

no more. Yet the trapper was approaching. She was sure of that. He could have no light, for he was feeling his way along the wall. Now and then a pebble fell. Ever nearer and nearer. Then she could hear him breathing. At that she held her own breath and grasped her candlestick more firmly.

Fred within a few yards of the corner saw the light waver suddenly. In his excitement he had stumbled against the wall where the tunnel swerved a little and had let his electric torch fall. He had been cursing his stupidity ever since, for not only had it fallen on a stone and made noise enough to wake the dead, but something had gone wrong with the thing and it had utterly refused to relight. He hesitated for a moment, but decided to go on in the dark. He had matches in his pocket if the worst came to the worst. Besides the lady had a light and she had not discovered apparently, in spite of the noise he had made, that she was trapped.

He had a great curiosity to know what she would be like. . . . Miss Eldershaw. . . . He smiled to himself as he remembered her encouraging him from her bath-chair. Would she still be in costume he wondered? What was she about? Was she packing her latest trophies?

All these questions passed through his mind. Then he reached the turning and there found the answer ready for him.

A black and white spectre with corkscrew curls seemed to spring up like a jack-in-the-box right in front of him. . . . It almost touched him it was so close. . . .

"Mrs. *Dodsworth!*" he exclaimed utterly taken by surprise.

For reply the lighted candle was thrust into his face.

Involuntarily he closed his eyes for a second and in that second Jane was past him. For one instant longer he had a vision of flying draperies. Then the candle was extinguished suddenly and all was pitch darkness.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, and turning like a flash, he

made after the fugitive, but Jane was more used to the passage than he was.

"I won by two lengths," she reported afterwards to Albert, "and was up the ladder and had the dresser fastened down in half a jiffy."

Her next move was to close the outer door and lock it. The shutters were still closed. Then lighting her candle again she set her disordered garments to rights all the time thinking rapidly.

"It's a tight corner," she muttered as she shook the sand out of her bonnet.

It was. Her preparations for the Exit had been so complete that her purse with the money for the journey in it was in the pocket of the buried skirt. She had no clothes for the journey either, and to go now to the station as Mrs. Dodsworth would be simply to court disaster. She would not get a train for many hours, and no train would be any good to her without money to buy her ticket. Bartonsmuir, on the other hand, besides being much more comfortable than the waiting-room at the station, would also be a sure source of supply. She could borrow money from Miss Gelatly after breakfast. The thought of breakfast decided her for she was very hungry.

"I'll chance it," she said as she tied her bonnet strings firmly. Then leaving the West Lodge as she had found it, she set off once more in the direction of the Big House.

"Where is Mrs. Dodsworth?" said Miss Caroline as the company assembled an hour later round the breakfast-table.

"She told me to say that she had gone back to bed," said Ann. "She had done rather much this morning and is a little over-tired."

"That comes of obeying you medical men too conscientiously," said Miss Caroline to David. "Personally I have always thought exercise before breakfast unhealthy. I am sorry, Lottie," she added, turning to her niece who sat

radiant on her left in spite of having gone to bed at three-thirty, "I'm sorry not to be able to introduce you to Mrs. Dodsworth."

"And I am sorry not to meet her," said Mrs. Alleyne politely, but she was preoccupied at the moment and spoke perfunctorily. "What an old hag I must look beside her and what a child she looks beside him!" she was thinking just then as she watched Ann handing a cup of tea to her supposed *financé*.

Yet David that morning was looking years younger than on the day before.

The change of air as Miss Emily had just remarked was already proving beneficial to him.

Mrs. Dodsworth spent a quiet and tranquil day.

"For when you're beaten you're beaten," she reflected, "and there's jolly well an end of it."

Then after five minutes or so, during which she contemplated the diamond sun—

"If it hadn't been for you," she added, "I should have *had* to marry him to make up for this."

Miss Gellatly brought her two volumes of Tagore to read and with them she seemed at least to pass the time. Mrs. Alleyne she heard on inquiry was to leave again that evening. "And unless Green turns up," added Arbuthnot, who was her informant, "she'll have to walk on her feet to the railway station."

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Dodsworth. "Is Green lost?"

"So it seems, m'm," said Arbuthnot with a sniff, "though Mr. Tosh knows where he is for he sent a message to say that no one was to bother themselves."

"Mr. Tosh knows where he is?" said Mrs. Dodsworth surprised.

"Yes, m'm, so it appears," said Arbuthnot, "but these men all hang together, m'm. If Green's lost he'll not be lost alone. That's one thing I'm certain of."

"What *do* you mean, Arbuthnot?" said Mrs. Dodsworth more and more mystified.

"I mean that he'll have the one with him that he had before," said Arbuthnot. "The young woman with the black hair. I saw her myself, m'm, not two weeks ago in the West Lodge one morning lowerin' the blind as if the place belonged to her."

"Indeed, Arbuthnot?" said Mrs. Dodsworth gravely. "I hope you reported it in the proper quarter?"

"I reported it to Miss Charteris, m'm," said Arbuthnot, "but I'm thinkin' this day that I would have been better to report it elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? What *do* you mean?" said Mrs. Dodsworth again.

"Oh, jist that I'm no' that doited," said Arbuthnot darkly, "but that I can see things that's takin' place before my nose, m'm."

She departed then shaking her head mysteriously, and leaving Mrs. Dodsworth quite perturbed.

"What an idiotic little incident," she said to herself. "The woman with the black hair. It sounds like the title of a penny novelette. And that woman reported it to the lovely Ann. It's too bad. That beautiful couple are a perfect nuisance. Not content with spoiling all my plans they make me sorry that I ever made any."

She lay in deep thought for some minutes.

"It must be rotten for him down there," she said to herself, "with nothing to think about but that other man being in possession. But I can't help it, you know," she went on apostrophising the imprisoned Fred. "When I get clear I shall attend to you—not a minute sooner."

She went on pondering then as to how she was to accomplish getting clear. The clothes she was to have travelled in were beyond her reach. She had a rain-coat, however, which with different accessories would be quite suitable for her to wear as a young person. She spent the afternoon there-

fore behind closed doors in turning one of her black and white bonnets into a neat toque.

When Arbuthnot reappeared with tea, however, no sign of any of this millinery work was visible.

"Yes, they're off," Arbuthnot informed her.

"So early?" said Mrs. Dodsworth surprised, "and whom do you mean by they?"

"Mrs. Alleyne and Dr. Warren, m'm," said Arbuthnot. "And sure enough they're walking to the railway station."

"Green still absent?" said Mrs. Dodsworth selecting a scone

"Oh, yes. *He'll* not hurry his-self," said Arbuthnot.

"And Mr. Tosh?"

"Oh, he's shieldin' him, though it's my belief he knows no more about where he is than I do, m'm."

"Why do you think that, Arbuthnot?" said Mrs. Dodsworth.

"It was me that took down his luncheon, m'm," said the old woman, "and I know by the looks of him he was fair scared when I asked him if he knew when Green was comin' back. He's never been up at the house all day, an' he does nothin' but sit there writin' and writin' and havin' meals brought down to him and that cat, till all the maids has flat refused to take them."

Mrs. Dodsworth's eyes over her book looked sympathetic. Behind it, however, she was smiling broadly.

"Well, I feel much better, Arbuthnot," she said brightly after a moment. "I shall come down to dinner and save the trouble of bringing it up to me."

"No trouble, m'm, I'm sure," said Arbuthnot cordially. "Things would run smooth enough if folks was all like *you*, m'm."

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

IN WHICH MR. TOSH FINDS IT INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO COMBINE THE PURSUIT OF LITERATURE WITH THAT OF CRIMINALS, AND MISS CAROLINE ABSOLUTELY REFUSES TO BE ESCORTED IN TO DINNER BY HIM

"I WANT to see Mr. Tosh for a moment on my way to the station," Mrs. Alleyne had said that afternoon to her fellow-traveller as the early tea was brought in. "I shall go on there immediately and meet you afterwards at the East Gate."

This manœuvre she felt served two purposes. She would see Mr. Tosh alone and she would leave the Engaged Couple to say their farewells in private.

Ann, she gathered, was to go no further than the gate. In the midst of all her talk and laughter that day she had contrived to hear most of what passed in her presence between her old love and his new one, and as they had sat down near her at tea in the hall Ann had said she had to do planting for Miss Caroline and could not go to the station. The planting, Lottie supposed, was because of the absence of Fred. This was doubtless his work. Wherever *was* the boy?

She, too, had heard the message sent that morning by Mr. Tosh. He knew where Fred was, at least Fred wished him to pretend to know evidently. It might spoil everything if she fussed about it. She did not fuss, therefore, but as the day wore on and there was still no sign of Fred she wondered more and more what could be keeping him.

She would have gone down at once to see Mr. Tosh if she had any hope of going there alone, but the Wrack-straws, as she said afterwards, simply stuck to her, and wherever she went that morning escorted her in twos and threes. Miss Caroline, indeed, who had taken her to see the herb-

garden, became forthwith so engrossed in it that she forgot all about her for the moment, and she was taking advantage of this lapse of hospitality to escape to the East Lodge through the shrubbery when she was cut off by Miss Emily, who up till then had had no opportunity for a tête-à-tête.

"My dear," she said. "How do you think your Aunt Caroline is looking?"

"Very well, indeed, dear," said Lottie drawing her little aunt's arm through hers as they passed along the walk between the laurestinas. "But you," she added glancing at her, "you look thin and worried yourself."

"I am," said Miss Emily in a low voice. "I *am* worried, Lottie. This disappearance of Green's worries me. You—you recommended Green to us. Are you sure that he is all that he seems to be, my dear?"

Lottie laughed evasively, thinking what she ought to say.

"You see," Miss Emily went on without waiting for an answer, so eager was she to unburden herself. "This is the east coast, you know, and there have been so many of them about. There have been suspicions."

"Suspensions?" said Lottie. "Suspensions of what, Aunt Emily?"

Miss Emily before answering looked around at the laurestinas as though listeners might be expected to be lurking behind each one of them.

"They suspect him of all kinds of things," she said in a trembling whisper clutching on to Lottie's arm in her anxiety. "It began by their wondering why he had not enlisted—that was Mrs. Pitmirran and Mrs. Fennimore—and when I said it might be a weak heart, they said *faint* heart was more like it. Then the next was that he was a German spy. That was Mrs. Dodsworth, and Miss Charteris came and told me. She would have told Caroline—at least she said she would—but I—I thought it would worry Caroline and it might not be true—and—I fear it was very wrong—I arranged with Miss Charteris not to tell her. Miss Charteris said she would let me know the moment she

saw cause for doing anything. But—but I fear I was wrong to trust her. Arbuthnot says she is in love with him.”

“*What?*” exclaimed Lottie aghast. “But she is engaged to——”

“Yes, yes,” said Miss Emily, “so she *must* be untrustworthy. I have watched her since—since Arbuthnot told me, at prayers and other times when he is there—and—and—I fear it’s true, Lottie.”

“Damnation!” said Lottie softly.

“And—and—so I fear it is because of this that she has not told me of—of a young woman with black hair that was visiting him at the West Lodge, Lottie.”

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Mrs. Alleyne. “A young woman with black hair visiting Fr—, visiting Green? But who told you this, Aunt Emily?”

“Arbuthnot,” said Miss Emily. “She saw her with her own eyes early one morning, and she was *doing* her hair, Lottie.”

“Gracious!” exclaimed Lottie. “Is Arbuthnot quite sure?”

“Quite sure,” said Miss Emily. “She saw her distinctly before she pulled down the blind as though the place belonged to her.”

Mrs. Alleyne was speechless.

“It breaks my heart,” said Miss Emily weeping, “to think of having to distrust Miss Charteris.”

“But, my good aunt,” said Mrs. Alleyne, “Miss Charteris will know nothing of this—this young woman with the black hair. She would be the last person to know of it.”

“Oh, no, I beg your pardon, Lottie dear,” said Miss Emily. “Arbuthnot told her of it the same day that she saw it.”

“Told her?” exclaimed Lottie.

“Yes, and that makes it stranger of her, don’t you think?” said Miss Emily. “Wouldn’t a *nice* girl leave off caring for a man as soon as she knew he had some one else?”

At this Lottie laughed aloud.

"Oh, hush, my dear," said Miss Emily. "It's such a chance to get you alone and if they hear you they will arrive from all directions. Besides I haven't told you the worst. To-day is silvercleaning day."

"Yes," said Lottie with sudden gravity.

"And Arbuthnot has just told me that all the Queen Anne silver is missing."

"All those lovely old forks and spoons?"

"Yes and other things as well. I—I can't *bear* to tell Caroline," said Miss Emily fairly breaking down.

"Well, don't tell her," said her niece unexpectedly.

Miss Emily gazed at her in blank amazement. Standing in the middle of the walk she looked a forlorn little figure.

"You poor dear!" said Lottie suddenly seizing her and kissing her on both cheeks.

"There's no need to tell her," she went on. "It's all right. You'll get all that silver back. I sent Green to look after you all and he's doing it. That's why he's away to-day."

"Green—looking after us?" said Miss Emily bewildered.

"Yes—Green," said Mrs. Alleyne. "You can have complete confidence in him, Aunt Emily. I can tell you nothing more now. But you can trust me, can't you, and I tell you that you might as soon convict me of being a thief and a spy as Green. Why he is here to protect you!"

"Oh, Lottie," cried Miss Emily, "you have no idea how you have relieved me!"

"Poor dear," said Lottie again, "I wish I had not to go back to-night. But the moment I get things fixed up at Rathness I shall come back to stand by you."

"Hush!" said Miss Emily suddenly, and begun violently blowing her nose as Miss Caroline, who had just remembered that she had a visitor, came round the corner trowel in hand.

From that moment till the time came for her to bid farewell to the assembled household Lottie had been surrounded. She had not had a moment to herself even to think.

"Though God knows," she said to herself as she hurried down the east drive, "I have enough to think about."

She thought hard then all the way to Mr. Tosh's door.

"The wretch," she concluded as she reached the doorstep, "if she throws him over for Fred I'll kill her."

This, however, she reflected as she waited for Mr. Tosh to respond to her knock was not likely to be necessary.

"Who would have thought it of Fred?" she soliloquised. "A young woman with black hair. Well, it just shows how you never can tell with men."

She had reached this point in her reflections when the door opened and disclosed Mr. Tosh in his dressing gown and somewhat dishevelled as to hair.

He was evidently mentally dishevelled also. He was quite unconscious of his strange appearance and his face fell when he saw her in a most unflattering manner.

Lottie laughed as she came in closing the door behind her.

"You are not glad to see me," she said, taking the chair he placed for her. "You expected to see Fred."

"Yes. Where is he?" he asked eagerly.

"Don't you know?" said Lottie surprised.

"My dear lady," he said, "I haven't the faintest idea. I thought when I heard that you were here that you had come to help."

"But this morning you sent a message," said Lottie. "They all think you know."

"Yes, he told me to prevent any disturbance if he disappeared, he wrote me a letter to that effect," said Mr. Tosh. He turned to the writing-table and fumbled among the papers there.

"Get up, Walter," he said then. "Perhaps you are lying on it." The cat being poked up rose reluctantly, but with no result.

"It's there somewhere," said Mr. Tosh helplessly.

"Never mind," said his visitor. "You see I am in a hurry, Mr. Tosh. I'm going away. I'm on my way to the station now."

"To the station!" exclaimed Mr. Tosh. "But surely——"
"And it is so nice to know," Lottie went on smoothly,
"that you are here to manage everything in Fred's absence."
The old man straightened himself in his chair.

"Of course, of course," he said. "I told Lorimer he could depend upon me."

"We all do," said Lottie rising, "and it will soon be all over, Mr. Tosh. The thief has evidently given herself away and——"

"Aha!" exclaimed Mr. Tosh. "I thought she was up to something. She looked like it last night."

"Then you know, too, which it is?" exclaimed Lottie. "Who is it?"

"Why, don't you know?" cried Mr. Tosh. "Miss Eldershaw of course."

"Miss *Eldershaw*!" exclaimed Lottie in utter amazement.

"That's who Lorimer is after," said Mr. Tosh.

"But she's in the hall having tea at this moment!" cried Lottie.

"I can't help that," said the old man. "That's who Lorimer is after. He told me so the night before last."

"*Did* he?" said Lottie breathlessly.

Her brain was in a whirl. Fred had said that he had special information. He must know. This Miss Eldershaw then whom she had been asked to see about by the highly respectable Charles Atterbury was a thief masquerading as an old lady—or rather there was no old lady called Miss Eldershaw at Bartonsmuir at all. Yet such an old lady had undoubtedly *been* at Bartonsmuir. Her niece had had letters from her. And—at this point Lottie felt a sudden chill—in those letters she had spoken of a danger threatening her. . . . What had that danger been? Had it been kidnapping? Perhaps worse?

Anything seemed possible.

"I must go," she cried jumping up. "I must go at once so that I may get back the sooner from Rathness. You can

always telephone to the police of course, Mr. Tosh, if you see any need for it. Good-bye."

Then she departed so absorbed that she passed David at the East Gate without seeing him and he had to hurry after her. He laughed as she apologised, standing contrite in the middle of the road.

Then they both laughed together and that broke the ice immediately—wonderfully. In an instant there was camaraderie between them instead of constraint. Both knew that they were laughing at so much more than just then appeared. Both had dreaded this moment since the morning—this first moment of being alone together after twenty years. And now—it had come and gone again, and they were trudging along side by side quite comfortably.

"You are such a busy woman now-a-days I hear," said David, breaking the pleasant silence, "that it is no wonder you are preoccupied."

"No wonder, indeed," she laughed. "I dare say you have noticed what a splendid chance this war—terrible as it is—is giving to us middle-aged women. One's heart bleeds for the young girls who many of them are losing so much, and for the wives and mothers whose men are in the trenches, and for the very old who can only look on and wait. But for us middle-aged and unattached ones—why it's nothing but pure luck."

David laughed, trudging on happily. He did not wish to say anything, only to listen to this new Lottie who had so strangely come back out of the dream-like past. The hedges on either side were in their first green again, just as they had been twenty years before. He was vaguely conscious of this as he listened to the voice, deeper and softer than he remembered it, that he had not heard for so long.

"You should see us," she went on, reminding him queerly, delightfully of the old Lottie as she walked lightly on beside him plucking at the green leaves now and then as she passed, just as she had always been wont to do aforetime. "You should see us at Rathness—old girls of forty and

fifty and sixty—how the Kaiser has renewed our youth for us. We've no time to get old now, to sit in arm-chairs and have nervous break-downs. We have no time for too much bridge. We have no time for rest-cures. The lonely ones of us who before were cut off from the world of men now are set in the midst of it at the hospitals and canteens. Born mothers without sons and born sisters without brothers can find any amount of them among these soldier lads. . . . Oh, I can tell you it has been a new life for them. It has renewed their good looks too. You should see even the plainest ones with their Queen Mary's Guild head-dresses on. Why they look like madonnas! You wouldn't know 'em again. Yes, we middle-aged of this war-time will never grow old I think, or at least when we do we shall have had a double share of youth first."

"I know what you mean," he returned eagerly. "I have felt the same. I feel the same. By Jove, this getting called up has a wonderful effect. We had begun to have the too-old-at-forty feeling—a lot of us. We had begun to dislike leaving our easy-chairs and going out again on wet nights. Now look at us—even the ones who were invalids, in the trenches and better often than ever they were. This war has made us ordinary men extraordinary."

They went on then for a little in silence again, their faces towards the west and the soft glow of sunset, and as she thought of the past and of the future concern for the man at her side gradually took possession of Lottie. She thought of what Miss Emily had told her of Ann. Was this second youth of David Warren's then to be blighted as his first had been? Was this beautiful girl—his second love—to treat him as his first had done? Worse, far worse, because she—Lottie—had never promised to marry him. . . . As she thought of Ann with Fred's image in her heart pretending to make love to him her blood boiled within her. Was public affront to be added this time to his private grief? Would she throw him over?

She hated Ann at that moment. Yet for some mysterious

reason, do as she would, she could not help speaking of her.

"Your fiancée is very lovely. I congratulate you," she said quite suddenly.

It was the last thing David had expected her to say just then.

"You—you mean Miss Charteris," he said after a moment.

"Yes," she said wondering.

"She is not now my fiancée," he went on quietly though his soul was in a turmoil. "She is as brave as she is beautiful. She had the courage to tell me last night that she could never be my wife because her love was given to another man. . . . She made me feel ashamed of myself."

"Ashamed?" said Lottie softly. "You had no need to be ashamed surely."

"I had," he said, looking steadily at the road in front of him. "I was a fool and a coward too—a fool to think I could ever love any one—else, and a coward because after I had bound myself to dear little Ann I was afraid to tell her that I could never love her as she should be loved."

All this time they were walking on "through mud-pools and everything," as Lottie said afterwards.

Neither looked at the other till Lottie burst out brokenly—

"I am a fool too, then, David. Look, I am crying like a great baby."

"Lottie," he exclaimed, coming to an abrupt standstill and facing round in incredulous amazement.

"But I am not a coward," she went on fumbling for her handkerchief. "I'll be as brave as Ann Charteris. I'll tell you though you haven't asked me to, and though you perhaps don't want me to, that I love you, David, and have loved you from the very beginning, and so far as I know always will. There now." Here she began walking on again very fast.

"Don't speak," she adjured him, half-laughing, half-

crying, as quite unable to believe what had happened to him he came up with her. "We've no time for talking of such things in these days—we middle-aged ones. We've to catch trains and make plans. So for heaven's sake say nothing."

"I couldn't anyhow, Lottie," he said hoarsely. "It's all too wonderful—too impossible."

She slackened her pace then and held out her hand to him, and they went on hand in hand between the green hedges towards the sunset, till when the station-house hove in sight she drew away from him again and said in her most business-like manner—

"Now tell me, what do you think of Miss Eldershaw, David?"

At this he laughed aloud. It was so like the Lottie of former days, and as of old he entered into her mood and did his best to fix his attention on this new object.

"Miss Eldershaw?" he said as sensibly as he could, for Lottie was looking at him at that moment and for one half-second there had been that in her eyes which made it difficult to be sensible. "I can't say I think much of her. She is an uninteresting old woman."

"There you are wrong," said Lottie, "she is very interesting and quite young. She is a thief and has probably kidnapped and possibly murdered somebody."

"Lottie!" exclaimed David, standing still. "Are you joking?"

"Not a bit," she replied, and then she told him what she had heard from Mr. Tosh and her deductions therefrom with the reasons annexed.

"This is fearful," said David, "and it is quite impossible for me to go back."

"For me also," said Lottie. "But there is one consolation, we are not needed."

"Not needed?" he exclaimed.

"No. Fred's there," said Lottie. "And Fred is a host in himself. He is my nephew-in-law and a V.C. and is spend-

ing the last of his leave after recovering from a bad wound doing a bit of detective work for a friend of mine. He came on the track of this very thief to Bartonsmuir where he has been living disguised as a chauffeur and general odd man for about three weeks."

"Oh, *that* man?" said David, smiling at the recollection of his drive from the railway station. "He'll lose no time anyhow."

"Of course he won't," said Lottie. "Besides he wants to be let alone. He told Mr. Tosh——"

But here she interrupted herself.

"Oh, my dear," she exclaimed. "There's the train coming and the stationmaster beckoning to us. But don't hurry. He's my benefactor of last night. He'll be sure to keep it waiting."

Even if Mr. Tosh had been in the mood for writing that afternoon, which he was not, "The Utter Impossibility of Annihilating Germany" would have made but little progress. It was fortunate that except for a postscript or two the manuscript had been completed. For from tea-time onwards the author was subjected to a series of interruptions. It was not so much the number of people who came to the East Lodge that worried him as the disturbing nature of the things they had to communicate.

Mrs. Alleyne first. He had rejoiced when he had heard of her presence at Bartonsmuir. He had a profound admiration for the ability of the lady of The Gables, and had no doubt that she was there at Lorimer's request to take a hand in rounding up the thief. He had been glad of this. He had been feeling rather too elderly for the job himself.

But lo! In the midst of his certainty of this had come her announcement that she had not the slightest idea where Lorimer was, that she had not been summoned by him, and that she did not know who the thief was, and that to crown all she was not staying at Bartonsmuir, but was already on her way back to the station. Scarcely had he regained a

measure of calmness after this when Arbuthnot appeared with Miss Caroline's compliments and a request that he would oblige her by attending family prayers that evening as immediately thereafter she intended to hold a conference upon a matter vitally affecting the household welfare.

Arbuthnot, who had evidently learned the message by heart, recited it to him with great emphasis and satisfaction, watching him the while out of her hard old eyes in an unnecessarily aggressive manner.

She was, indeed, very gratified at being Miss Caroline's messenger on this occasion. None of the other servants had any idea that there was to be a conference. Her knowledge was the reward for having gone in spite of Miss Emily to the head of the house about the Queen Anne silver. She had found her mistress alone and had been taken into her confidence—a thing so rare with Miss Caroline that very great honour attached to it. There was to be a conference after prayers and she—Arbuthnot—must see that every domestic was present. Things had been going on which must be stopped if the House of Bartonsmuir was to be preserved from discredit.

Upon this Arbuthnot had been about to return confidence for confidence and thrill Miss Caroline with an account of the young woman with the black hair and of Ann's reticence regarding her which she had discovered through Miss Emily, when the entrance of Mrs. Bellairs had put an end to the tête-à-tête.

As she went along thinking about it all, however, her success with Miss Caroline went to her head a little and she wondered whether it would not be advisable to thrill Mr. Tosh instead.

He as well as the other Wrack-straws had always received Arbuthnot on a more familiar footing than the other servants. She had been fifty years at Bartonsmuir. It had always been a grievance with her, however, that since the departure of Albert, Mr. Tosh so evidently preferred the ministrations of Green or of Miss Charteris to hers. Perhaps

"Mr. Tosh says there's some work that must be done in the winter to see if 'Vance's' 'Moss' is 'Vance's' 'Moss' or not. He says to attend to it."

"You say 'Vance's' 'Moss' is not the same as the 'Vance's' 'Moss'?"

"Yes, it is the same, but it is 'Vance's' 'Moss'." she said.

Mr. Tosh started out in deep thought concerning his own affairs.

"I had not thought of coming in to discuss it tonight, Mr. Tosh," he said. "I am as you see very busy."

He shuffled about among his papers.

"Will you tell Miss Catherine with my compliments——"

he said.

"I will if you like, sir," said Arbuthnot as he passed to think of another excuse. "But if ye take my advice, sir, and pardon me for offerin' it, you'll attend the conference, sir."

"Why, whatever is it about?" said Mr. Tosh, with some indignation.

"I know what I am going to do at it, anyhow, sir," said Arbuthnot.

"Yes, Arbuthnot?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, me, sir," said Arbuthnot. "Queer things is happenin' at Bartonsmuir and has been kept quiet to oblige people that's jist as queer themselves. But now I am goin' to speak out, sir. *Speak out!*" repeated Arbuthnot in a loud determined voice.

"What the devil does she mean?" thought Mr. Tosh.

"Quite right, quite right," he said aloud. "That is to say if there is anything to speak out about."

"There's them here, sir," Arbuthnot continued, "that are in charge when they should be no longer in charge. They were right enough at first so long as there were no young men about. But now they're fair carried away an' care for nothin' but hushin' up things."

"My good Arbuthnot," said Mr. Tosh bewildered, "will you kindly tell me to whom you are referring?"

"I name no names sir," said the old woman, "but as you're the only gentleman in the place it is but right that you should know about it, sir."

"But, my good soul," cried Mr. Tosh irritably, and violently dislodging Walter who had just settled himself with great deliberation and exactitude on his shoulder, "how can I know about it if you don't tell me? There is some one in charge you say who should no longer be in charge. You cannot mean Miss Caroline or Miss Emily?"

"No, sir, I do not mean Miss Caroline or Miss Emily," said Arbuthnot.

"Do you mean Miss Charteris?" said Mr. Tosh.

Arbuthnot slowly inclined her head.

"Then, Arbuthnot, you are talking nonsense," he exclaimed. "I know of no more capable young person. Of course she may have been a little upset by the visit of her young man as you call him, but——"

"Oh, if it's Dr. Warren ye're meanin' I don't call *him* her young man, sir," interrupted Arbuthnot.

"He is not very young of course," said Mr. Tosh, "but——"

"He's not her sweetheart at all, sir," said Arbuthnot. "It's Green she's taken up with *now*."

"*Green!*" ejaculated Mr. Tosh so loudly that even Walter, settling down among the papers again, took the trouble to turn and look at him.

"I was astonished myself, sir," said Arbuthnot. "But it's Green she's taken up with. A young woman as good as married, too. But she's fair bereft about him."

Mr. Tosh was speechless.

"Not that she's likely to get him for all that," Arbuthnot added. "He's provided for already."

"*What?*" exclaimed Mr. Tosh. "Lorim—, Green provided for? What do you mean, woman?"

Arbuthnot drew herself up.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, I'm not accustomed to be called names," she said, "and fine you know, sir, I dare say, that Green is provided for. You men always shield each other. I know. But I saw her with my own eyes in his lodge one morning."

Mr. Tosh's lips seemed to form the word "What?" but no sound came from them.

Arbuthnot moved towards the door. Then with one hand on the knob she turned for a parting word.

"Doin' her hair she was, sir," she said. "Long black hair, sir, quite at home, and lowerin' the blind as if the place belonged to her. But they've gone too far now as they'll see very soon."

She was gone before Mr. Tosh had recovered his power of speech.

"Now what on earth has Lorimer been up to?" he asked of the closed door.

The manuscripts as Walter lay down finally made a rustling sound. There was no other answer.

"There has been some nonsense *somewhere*, you know," Mr. Tosh went on, addressing the ink-bottle this time. "There is never smoke without fire. Has some woman got hold of Lorimer? Am I keeping them all quiet here thinking he is on the trail while he is simply away philandering? These young fellows, you know—— Well, this is a lesson to me. I should have taken the lead sooner in this matter. But that reptile Albert needn't think he's going to score another success. From this time onwards he has *me* to deal with." Here leaving his tea untouched on the table he hurried into his bedroom and began collecting various garments for the evening. He also selected a good strong stick and saw that his lantern was in readiness.

Meantime, Arbuthnot went on her way, having to her own great satisfaction astonished and impressed Mr. Tosh, and finding that she had still some spare time at her command she naturally wished to repeat the performance. Looking round for some one else to experiment upon, therefore, her

eyes fell upon Ann planting fox-gloves in the new herb-garden, and grunting with grim joy she left the drive and began to thread her way through the intervening rose-bushes.

Ann was happier at her work that evening than she had been for many a day. Her parting with her new friend David had been a thing to remember. A load of care had been lifted off her heart. She was free to love now without disloyalty the man who had taught her to love.

It was wonderful to be working thus amid his very foot-prints in the garden that he had prepared. Every clod of the freshly turned earth seemed dear because his hands, perhaps, had touched it.

Around her was the sorcery of the spring evening. A dreamlike haze overspread the further shrubberies. The tops of the highest trees still glowed faintly in the fading sunset. Hidden thrushes and blackbirds were singing among the laurestinas. All round the peace of night was closing in gently, solemnly. Ann drew a long breath of sheer delight in it all as she sat up for a moment among her fox-gloves. Grief for the moment was lulled to sleep. Soon it would wake again, but just then she was free and happy. Anything, everything, seemed possible. Then suddenly a footstep crunched on the gravel behind her. Arbuthnot was coming through the rose-garden, the sunset-light falling on her white cap and apron and making her wrinkled face seem browner than it was by contrast.

To Ann, watching her, there was something ominous in the way in which she approached silently, without a smile of greeting, threading her way among the rose-bushes.

"Well, Arbuthnot," she said with the feeling that if bad news was coming the sooner it was over the better. She half rose as she spoke scattering a lapful of fox-glove plants.

"Well, Arbuthnot," she repeated. "What is it?"

Arbuthnot came still nearer, stepping gingerly over the clods.

.

"You may well ask, miss?" she said at last in a hoarse whisper. "Something awful's happened this time. Green's bolted with the Queen Anne silver. We found it out when we opened the safe this mornin'."

"Arbuthnot!" exclaimed Ann, starting up to her slim height while a deep flush of anger mounted to the roots of her hair. "How *dare* you say such a thing?"

She stood quivering with indignation, but Arbuthnot was not daunted. She enjoyed seeing Ann in a temper.

"Where is he then?" she asked. "And what's more where's his accomplice?"

"Accomplice?" Ann breathed.

"Yes—accomplice," said Arbuthnot. "The young woman with the black——"

"Be silent!" said Ann between her clenched teeth.

Arbuthnot drew herself up.

"It strikes me, miss," she said meaningly, "that the time's past for bein' silent and been long past, too, though *you* may think different."

With that she turned on her heel and left Ann standing all rage and misery in the middle of the herb-garden. For a moment she remained outwardly motionless there while her sore heart bounded on madly within her. This new humiliation and accusation had come upon her with stunning suddenness. It had darted upon her unawares out of the sunset peace. It was incredible that any one ever would believe such a thing of him. But yet—— What had they not already said—insinuated against him? And what after all could she do for him either—she who was shut out from his life by this other woman of whom Arbuthnot had wished to speak? She had silenced Arbuthnot, but her own heart would not be silenced.

Ah! She could not bear that this woman should stand thus between. For she did stand there and would so stand for ever and ever. The thought was a sharp agony. . . .

She flung down her trowel and left the herb-garden, stepping recklessly on her newly planted fox-gloves, and hastened

away along the path through the laurestinas, scaring the blackbirds and the thrushes.

On the door-step of the East Lodge she paused for a moment to recover breath and to force back the tears that would rise in spite of her. She must be able to speak clearly and distinctly to Mr. Tosh. He would want to know all particulars.

After a moment, however, she tapped sharply and then stood waiting for permission to enter. It was long in coming. She tapped again.

Mr. Tosh, however, was otherwise engaged at that moment.

He was in fact undergoing his third interruption since tea-time, and just as Ann knocked he was trying to make out what a squeaky little voice in Edinburgh was saying to him on the telephone.

"Damn you, sir, speak out!" he was saying and consequently he did not hear the first knock at all.

The squeaky voice began again.

"I was saying," it replied, "that if you have any influence, sir, with the man that is living at the West Lodge, I implore you do not allow him to sleep there to-night."

"Why not?" demanded Mr. Tosh.

"There is to be a Zeppelin raid," said the voice.

"That's no reason," snapped the old man. "The man at the West Lodge must just take his chance like the rest of us."

"No, *no*, NO!" urged the voice. "He'll not be like the rest of you. The West Lodge is *dangerous*!"

"Dangerous? I don't believe it," said Mr. Tosh. "What's the difference between it and this lodge?"

"There's this difference," replied the voice in a kind of shriek. "There's a dug-out and a passage under it cram full of bombs and petrol."

Here the unseen speaker rang off.

"The devil!" exclaimed Mr. Tosh, and he was so shaken

that he started violently when Ann knocked for the second time.

Recognising the need for composure, however, in the "only gentleman in the place," he forced himself to go and open the door.

The sight of Ann pulled him together again. Not that he was glad to see her. He had been very fond of Ann and now his revulsion of feeling on hearing of what he thought was her duplicity was proportionately strong against her. He remembered with wrath the speech he had made at her Betrothal Feast only the night before.

Like the renegade Lorimer, it seemed Ann had thought to hoodwink him. In taking hold of the situation, therefore, he must also take hold of Ann. He would begin at once. She evidently wanted something. Well, whatever it was—she did not deserve it and she should not get it.

"Come in, Miss Charteris," he said blandly.

"I won't keep you long, Mr. Tosh," said Ann as soon as they were seated, speaking very quietly and rapidly though at times the words seemed to choke her. "But Miss Caroline wishes some plants planted and I am not sure how to do them. Is—is Green likely to be back soon?"

"He did not say when he would be back," said the old man, looking coldly at her as he polished his spectacles.

There was a moment's silence and then Ann burst out—

"Mr. Tosh, you are a friend of Green's, aren't you?"

"Why do you ask that?" he said.

"Because he will need a friend presently—to-night, perhaps," said the girl passionately. "They are accusing him of awful things—things he never did, I am sure of it."

"Oh, indeed?" said Mr. Tosh.

At those two words and the tone in which they were spoken Ann's flow of eloquence ceased as though it were dried up at the source. She sat looking at the old man for a moment in silence while he went on polishing his spectacles. Then she rose from her seat and Miss Caroline could not have been more dignified.

"I see," she said, "that I have made a mistake in thinking of you as his friend. I beg your pardon for intruding. Good afternoon, Mr. Tosh."

Then she was gone before he could say anything or even so much as open the door for her.

This last annoyed him more than anything she had done.

"The chit," he soliloquised, "posing as a tragedy queen and carrying on with two men—at least not content with one—they're all alike, these pretty women."

Then with a shock his mind reverted to what it had been occupied with when Ann came in, and after standing thinking for about a minute he proceeded to his bedroom and changed into evening clothes. Then donning his wide-awake and his fur coat, and taking up his stick and his unlighted lantern, he went forth resolutely into the dusk, setting his face towards the West Lodge. It was almost dark when he reached it, but immediately he caught sight of the white paper on the door and with a smothered exclamation he approached it, striking a match to read it by.

The notice was disappointing, however.

"Will be back in an hour."

"Now when," said Mr. Tosh, addressing the surrounding trees, "when do you suppose that this was written?"

The trees, though they whispered a little, gave no articulate reply, but his ear at that moment caught the sound of strenuous raking, and looking up the drive he saw a stout short-petticoated figure there with sturdy white-stockinged legs that glimmered at him through the twilight.

It was Maggie working as usual against time. She was so absorbed that she did not notice his approach and started violently when he addressed her.

"Eh, mercy, sir, ye fair scared me!" she exclaimed, clapping her hand to her side.

"Margaret," said Mr. Tosh, taking no notice of this remark, indeed not hearing it, he was so absorbed in his

own affairs. "Do you see that white paper on the door of the West Lodge?"

Maggie stared in the direction indicated as though endeavouring to perceive the paper for the first time.

"Ay, sir," she said at last, "I seen it since ten o'clock this mornin'. It's been there all day, sir, that paper."

"All day?" exclaimed Mr. Tosh.

"Ay, sir," said Maggie, eagerly crossing her hands on her rake-handle and leaning comfortably upon it. "And I was jist sayin' to myself when ye came up, sir, 'Now I wonder——'"

"Thank you, Margaret," said Mr. Tosh, turning away with calm hauteur, while Maggie began raking again feverishly.

In reality Fred's colleague was anything but calm, however.

Fred had intended to be back then at eleven o'clock that morning, earlier probably, since eleven was the hour when Miss Caroline always expected to see him. His message now was quite comprehensible. All he had wanted to do was to explain that he would soon be back if he should be a little belated, say a quarter of an hour or even half-an-hour, as he had intended to be. He had never meant that a whole day should pass before he returned. . . . Some accident then must have happened. Mr. Tosh felt quite faint at the thought. But the sight of the lodge door standing open steadied him once more and taking his courage in both hands he firmly stepped across the threshold.

He felt a cold sensation down his spine as he thought of the dug-out full of bombs. A grip, however, he reminded himself, must be taken and he was relieved to see that the fire was quite out. He lit his lantern very carefully and then began to go round the room dumping his stick on the planking at intervals of about fourteen inches. He did not dump too heavily, however, because he did not know how near the surface the dug-out might be. He made the complete circuit of the room, however, and of the other rooms too, but he found nothing of any moment.

After all, he considered as he came to a standstill in the kitchen once more, it was very unlikely indeed that the telephone message was of any moment either. These sensational things very often weren't. You read them in the evening papers and in the morning they were contradicted. To-morrow, however, he might see the policeman in the village or ring him up and ask him to come and see him. He might then investigate further. In the meantime all that was necessary was to make sure that Lorimer did not sleep there that night. For why—apart from the danger to Lorimer—should he worry about dug-outs when there was so much above ground to be attended to? Having come to this conclusion he searched for writing materials and then sitting down at the table in the light of his lantern he indited the following notice:

"From information received I am in a position to state that this house is at all times dangerous and especially so to-night. On no account, therefore, let any one sleep in it or indeed enter it more than is absolutely necessary.—TOSH."

This he propped on the table and then with great precaution lit the lamp beside it and set it so that it would illuminate it.

"That will make everything absolutely safe in any event," he said to the new moon as he went up the drive again.

At the same moment Maggie, who by this time had put away her rake for the night and was now helping the cook to dish up, nearly dropped the potatoes and uttered a loud exclamation.

"Eh, mercy, Mary!" she cried. "I've seen the new moon through glass. Something unlucky's to happen. Tak' my word for't."

"Well, it's happened sure enough, ye gomeril," returned the cook angrily. "Ye've made me burn my fingers wi' yer nonsense. If ye'd been watchin' what ye was at instead o' glowerin' oot o' the windy, ye'd ne'er ha' seen it. *You* an' yer new moons!"

Mrs. Dodsworth saw the new moon too through the drawing-room window where she was standing talking to Mrs. Pitmirran when Mr. Tosh entered.

"Come along, naughty man," said Mrs. Pitmirran who was in a heavily facetious mood that evening. "Come and share my scolding with this lady here and help her to explain what you two have been doing with yourselves since last we had the pleasure of your society."

Mrs. Pitmirran's wit, for her, was quite scintillating that night, perhaps because, as she informed Mrs. Dodsworth, she was giving her diamond sun a rest. She had heard that day of the death of a second cousin and was wearing a sumptuous set of pearls in consequence. She was still rallying her two rather inattentive companions when the other Wrack-straws began to come in. Then, however, the air of gravity, almost of depression, that these brought with them seemed to spread till it reached and gradually quenched her.

From various causes the Wrack-straws that night were anything but a cheerful gathering.

Miss Gellatly was the first to enter. She seated herself with a book and from time to time as the talk in the window still continued looked round with a resigned and reproachful air.

"Just as if it were a reading-room with 'Silence' written up," said Mrs. Pitmirran to Mrs. Dodsworth. But Mrs. Dodsworth only nodded. The depression already was affecting her. When Mrs. Fennimore entered a moment after Mrs. Dodsworth began talking at random and hardly listening to what was being said to her. She was remembering that she would see this old room in the twilight no more and realising with surprise that she was sorry to say farewell to it. Her restless black eyes roved round it for the last time, over the bowls of Spode and the jars of Lowestoft, over the quaintly valenced window-curtains once too brilliant green perhaps, but long since mellowed by the suns of many summers, over the gorgeous hollyhocks and roses

of the carpet now worn into vague beauty by the tread of many comers and goers.

Then they returned to Mrs. Fennimore sitting frowning at the fire and the sight recalled her to herself once more.

"I am getting sentimental," she reflected, "and it's as safe for a tight-rope dancer to get sentimental on his tight-rope as it is for me to get sentimental at this moment."

The next comer was Mrs. Bellairs, usually the liveliest of company, to-night, however, rather nervous-looking and all but silent.

Miss Eldershaw, on the other hand, who came in after her leaning on a gold-topped stick, kept smirking unaccountably at everybody.

In spite of the new moon the dusk fell heavy like a pall.

Clouds overspread the sky and filled the room with queer shadows.

Miss Emily who came in next said, with a little shiver, that they really ought to have had the lights lit.

At that moment, however, the gong began to sound and before it had ceased booming Miss Caroline entered. She was statelier than ever and grave as an executioner.

"Well, Caroline," said Mrs. Bellairs with forced lightness as the lady of the house advanced, "it's not often that you are the last, my dear."

Miss Caroline's gaze, however, was fixed for the moment elsewhere.

"Good evening, Mrs. Dodsworth, good evening, Mr. Tosh," she said. Those persons responded to her greeting.

Mr. Tosh as he did so came forward as usual to offer her his arm.

"I thank you, sir," she said bowing majestically, "but I have a fancy to lead the way alone to-night. Or no—Emily, come here," she added. "We will lead the way together."

She turned her back upon them all then and with stately steps swept on ahead, Miss Emily obediently trotting alongside her, while the cortège, as Mrs. Bellairs called it afterwards, followed them to the dining-room in solemn silence.

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH

WHICH SPECIAL CONSTABLES IN THE COURSE OF THEIR
DUTY COME WITHIN AN ACE OF MAKING THE FINAL
CHAPTER

WHILE upon the surface all these things were going forward, the subject of so many contradictory opinions was making the best of it underground. He had tried at first to attract the attention of Maggie whom he knew to be likely to be engaged upon the drive that morning. But he had not had much hope of success and his lack of confidence was justified, for though she did hear him and admitted afterwards that there had been an awful queer noise, she had thought, she said, that it was guns practising. This was the less remarkable because since the beginning of the war every abnormal sound had been put down by her to this cause. She therefore did not think of mentioning what she had heard to Mr. Tosh. Neither did it occur to her to seek to discover its origin in the West Lodge.

So Fred hammered at the bottom of the dresser till he was tired of hammering. His failure to make Maggie hear, however, by no means made him give way to despair. He neither tore his hair nor gnashed his teeth, he merely shrugged his shoulders, reminded himself that the suit-case must be there as no human being could have gone at such a pace carrying it, and felt in his pockets for his match-box.

When he found it, however, he did say a few things, for there were only two matches in it. He reserved them both for viewing the scene of action, for he had made up his mind that his best cause was to dig himself out with his hands if no other better implement offered. He would have given much for his spade, now lying in the corner of his room, but he remembered that the sand was soft and friable. It would be strange, he reflected, if he could not make a way through. Therefore the sooner he got to work the better.

Whenever he turned the corner he struck a match and the first thing he saw by its light was the box of ginger-nuts. He had not noticed it before in his excitement over the suitcase. Now he hailed it with joy. The match just lasted till he had opened it. The ginger-nuts lay crisp and untouched within, a delightful sight, but still more delightful at that moment was the lid of the box which he at once pulled off. Here was an implement of sorts at least. Filling his pockets with the ginger-nuts he went forward to the sand-wall and began with the lid to demolish his own work, many a time cursing himself for having done it so well and the sand for seeming to fill up again immediately every gap as he made it. He could only judge of his progress by his sense of touch, but it seemed to him that he had made very little way in proportion to his strenuous labour when with his eyes full of grits and his heart full of irritation he sat down to rest and recover breath. Then for the first time he realised that he was dead tired and remembered that for days and nights he had hardly slept. It must be this he supposed combined with the stuffiness of the place that was making it so difficult to work. He must give himself forty winks. It would save time in the end. He lay down, therefore, at full length on the sand, his head on the suitcase, in readiness for any surprise attack. Then folding his arms and closing his eyes he was asleep before he had time to realise how very comfortable he was.

Hour after hour he slept without moving, without dreaming, while outside the day passed on into evening and Ann in a growing fever of anxiety prayed passionately for his returning.

He heard nothing of Mr. Tosh's investigation. He was nearly a mile away from it for one thing, for another his colleague might have dumped on his body with his stick instead of the floor of the West Lodge without waking him. Thus Mr. Tosh's collaboration was of as little use to him that night as the notice on the table with the lighted lamp beside it. The lamp, indeed, was worse than useless since it served to buoy Ann up with false hopes.

"He is returned," she said to herself with a strange thrill of mingled joy and sorrow when she saw the light through a chink in the doorway.

She had stolen away after dinner for a few moments and hastened down the drive in the darkness. Night had fallen heavily now. Hardly a star illumined the blackness and the warm lamplight showed very clearly slanting out through the half-open doorway. It struck her as strange that the light should be showing like this. It was her duty, she remembered, to see that everything was dark. She could not bring herself to go near the West Lodge however. He had come back. The rest must take care of itself.

She returned to the drawing-room with a beating heart. The clock on the mantelpiece pointed to eight. In an hour would come prayers and she would see him again.

Miss Eldershaw beat her at every game of draughts that night without any effort on her part to allow her to do so, though that old lady from another cause was as distraite as her opponent. At the card-table the same symptoms were noticeable in Mr. Tosh. He kept glancing at the clock from time to time in a manner quite unusual with him. Once he actually put down his cards on the wrong side after shuffling them, which made Mrs. Dodsworth regard him curiously for a moment.

Mrs. Dodsworth indeed, though her play showed no sign of it, was more absent-minded that night than any one in the drawing-room. Ann's face at the dinner-table had taken away her appetite.

"If anything happened to that man down in the hole she would wilt like a flower," she kept saying to herself.

Then the awful thought came to her that perhaps there really might be bombs concealed down there somewhere, and she grew hot all over till she remembered that Fred was as used to bombs as she was to turnips.

"And no doubt he's found the ginger-nuts," she reassured herself, "and by breakfast-time I shall be far away and be able to telephone to them to rescue him. And he's

got the booty and he'll get the girl and he's scoring all round, the lucky beggar."

As the thought passed through her mind the post-bag came in, borne by Arbuthnot who herself was evidently bursting with information.

"Please, m'm," she said, before Miss Caroline had begun the opening ceremony, "the postman says that there's to be a Zeppelin raid to-night."

Miss Caroline calmly went on opening.

"Then, Arbuthnot," she said. "We shall know how to meet it, I hope."

"Indeed, Caroline," said Mrs. Bellairs with a little shudder, "I hope we shall *not* meet it."

"There is no reason why we should not escape, Maud," said Miss Caroline, "but if we do not we shall be no worse off than many others."

"Which is no consolation whatever to me," said Mrs. Bellairs. "I for one shan't sleep one wink till morning."

As she spoke the gong sounded and she started violently.

"What? Prayers already?" said Mrs. Pitmirran discontentedly, for she had just been dealt a perfect no trump hand. "It's half an hour before the time."

Mr. Tosh, however, had flung down his cards and a moment later the servants, who had apparently been awaiting the signal, filed slowly into their places at the other end of the room.

Ann's heart almost stopped as one after the other they came in.

Only at last when all were seated did it go on again in great throbs. He was not there. He had not returned. Who then was in the West Lodge? Who had lighted the lamp? It must be she—the woman with the black hair, who was there awaiting him.

Ann wrung her hands together on her lap, striving to banish all thought, to fix her mind on Miss Caroline's reading. Otherwise she felt she might do something unheard of, insane, so overwhelming was the storm of jealousy rising within her.

With all the force of will at her command she clung to her self-control and forced herself to listen. But as the words Miss Caroline was reading gradually penetrated to her comprehension through all the excitement and anguish of her mind, another emotion mingled with the confusion already there. Fear laid a cold hand upon her heart and stilled it.

Why had Miss Caroline chosen these words to-night?

"'And the Lord said unto Joshua,'" she was reading, "'get thee up. Wherefore art thou fallen upon thy face? Israel hath sinned—yea, they have even transgressed my covenant which I commanded them. Yea, they have taken of the accursed thing and have also stolen and dissembled also and they have even put it among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel cannot stand before their enemies. They turn their backs before their enemies because they are become accursed. I will not be with you any more except ye destroy the accursed thing from among you. Sanctify yourselves against to-morrow, for thus saith the Lord the God of Israel. There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel. Thou canst not stand before thine enemies until ye take away the accursed thing from among you.'"

Miss Caroline here raised her eyes from the Bible—a huge family one—which lay on the table in front of her.

"My friends," she said laying aside her long-handled eye-glasses, while all the company sat staring at her in awed amazement, "these words were spoken to Joshua in the face of great and imminent danger, I have read them to you now in the presence of a peril the like of which Joshua never even imagined. A cruel and relentless foe, compared to whom the men of Ai in skill and resource were but a handful of children, may be hovering over us to-night dealing death and destruction. My friends, none of us perhaps may see the morning."

Here Maggie who had been sitting open-mouthed on a back seat gave a strangled yell of terror and threw her apron over her head.

This ebullition, startling as it was, nevertheless prevented

a much worse disturbance for the cook who was on the verge of hysterics was so furious with her subordinate that she recovered instantly.

Without pausing, Miss Caroline continued her discourse.

"We must all die," she said, at which Maggie shuddered visibly under her apron, "and it is probable that death from an aerial bomb may be less painful than many others. The fact remains, however, that it is a manner of extinction which may come suddenly at any time without giving opportunity for preparation. For this reason I am speaking to you as I am doing to-night. I wish you, my friends, to be ready for any emergency that may arise and, as Joshua was commanded to remove what must prove to be a source of internal weakness in the community of which he was in charge, so I feel that it is my duty to remove from our midst any feeling of mutual suspicion and distrust which may have arisen among us. I have reason to believe that as valuables of various kinds have gone amissing during the last few weeks, some outsider, some German probably, has succeeded in gaining access to this house. It is therefore my intention to notify him by means of placards which I myself will place about the grounds that if the missing articles are not returned in twenty-four hours proceedings will be taken against him. On the other hand, should the missing articles be returned within the time fixed no more will be said about the matter. Silver and gold and precious stones," added Miss Caroline, "at such moments as these seem of little account. Therefore let not the loss—the temporary loss, I hope—of earthly goods cause us who are in the shadow of death to feel any unkindness towards each other. Let us meet the foe in a united spirit. So that whatever be the state of its material wealth the courage at least of this community shall remain undiminished."

"Oh, Caroline, Caroline!" said Mrs. Bellairs to herself as she looked round the semi-circle of faces, some blank with bewilderment, some aghast, some indignant, but all with eyes fixed upon the lady of the house.

"Let us pray," said Miss Caroline suddenly, and then every one kneeled down and the semi-circle of faces was hidden. With her mind's eye, however, Mrs. Bellairs still saw them.

"The conference is not over yet," she said to herself.

And she was right.

Hardly had the company risen from their knees when Mrs. Fennimore and Arbuthnot took the floor together.

Arbuthnot, however, as in duty bound gave place.

"Indeed, Miss Caroline," said Mrs. Fennimore very wroth and speaking as though no prayer had intervened between her and the last speech, "and do you expect us then to sit calmly down and wait for twenty-four hours after notifying the thief for him to return our things to us?"

"And to allow him to escape without punishment for his crime?" exclaimed Mrs. Dodsworth starting up. "Really, Miss Caroline, I cannot agree to this."

"And beggin' your pardon, ladies," Arbuthnot now burst in unable to keep silence for a moment longer, "there's no need for placards, Miss Caroline. We know who the thief is and that never a placard he'll read more at Bartonsmuir for he's bolted and away wi' all the jewellery and the silver and his licht-o'-love into the bargain."

"Who in the world does the woman mean?" said Mrs. Bellairs, but no one heard her.

Mr. Tosh had risen to his feet.

"My dear Miss Caroline," he began, and they all paused to listen to him.

But just at that moment outside in the hall the telephone bell rang loudly.

"Miss Charteris," said Miss Caroline calmly, "be so kind as to see who that is."

Then as Ann rose half-fainting from her seat and left the room closing the door behind her she signified by a wave of her hand to Mr. Tosh that he might continue.

Ann, drawing a chair up to the telephone, sat down. She felt faint and sick. The worst had happened. Even now the

man she loved was being accused and she was unable to move hand or foot to help him.

The bell rang again violently. With shaking hand she placed the receiver at her ear.

"Is that Bartonsmuir House?" said a rough voice immediately.

"Yes," said Ann.

"This is the police office," said the voice. "What d'ye mean by havin' a bonfire in yer garden at this time o' night? Are ye not aware it's a criminal offence?"

"A bonfire!" exclaimed Ann.

"Ay, a bonfire," said the rough voice, "lightin' up the whole country-side an' this the night they're expectin' a Zeppelin raid. I never saw the like o' it."

"But there must be some mistake," said Ann incredulously.

At this a bellow came through the telephone.

"Mistake? Well, it's to be pit oot double quick an' see there's no mistake aboot that or it'll be the worse for ye and no mistake. Ye pro-Germans! Ye damned pro-Germans!"

Here the speaker rang off with great violence.

Next moment Ann had opened the drawing-room door.

"Come!" she said, "there is a fire in the grounds somewhere."

She thought she said it loudly and peremptorily. In reality she spoke the words in a hoarse whisper.

Even if she had not, however, it is probable that no one would have paid any attention, they were all so absorbed at the moment in listening to what Mr. Tosh was saying.

She did not wait for any response, however. In a few flying steps she was in the deserted dining-room and had drawn back the curtains from one of the open windows. Even before she had time to look out she noticed the strong smell of charred wood. Next moment she was out of the window and running hard across the lawn, for it was the East Lodge that was burning and throwing up sparks like a great bonfire just as the policeman had told her.

How it happened will never be known for certain.

Walter the cat was the only living being who could have explained it for Ann remembered afterwards seeing him come out of the lodge when it was in full blaze and take up a comfortable position on the branch of a neighbouring laurel.

At the time, however, she was conscious only of the leaping, licking tongues of fire that were streaming out of the sitting-room window and of the fact that no one had followed her, that she had been left to herself to cope with them. After all, however, she reflected in a kind of desperation, the only one who could have been any real help was gone—had abandoned her utterly, or so they said, and she had no time to think. . . . She had no time to wait either for a set of old women-servants who might or might not lose their heads, for the Wrack-straws who were here because of their incapacity. The reinforcements were not worth wasting precious time over. The one thing was to get the motor hose. Mercifully there was a gardening-tap near the lodge that she could screw it on to. She had seen Green using it more than once. She thought of all this as she ran. It seemed hours before she reached the motor-house. In reality, however, wonderfully few minutes had elapsed before she found herself kneeling breathless in front of the tap.

At any other time she could have screwed on the hose in two minutes. Now her hand shook so that she could not adjust it. Again and again she tried with the crackling of the fire behind her and her heart thumping in her ears. The fear at last came upon her that in another moment she would fall unconscious.

"Oh, God!" she exclaimed.

Then at once, as though in answer to the half-articulate cry, a cool firm hand closed over hers and took the hose from her. Next moment it was screwed into place and a great hissing from the burning house told her that the water was already playing upon it. Turning towards it she saw that clouds of white steam were rising from the roof among the leaping flames and smoke.

"Oh, thank you!" she exclaimed breathlessly as for the first time she looked at her companion. Then a cry of surprise escaped her. "Mrs. Dodsworth!" she exclaimed.

But Mrs. Dodsworth did not heed her. Her eyes were turned to the sky above them. Her lips moved.

"What is that?" she said though no voice was audible.

Ann looked and suddenly a strange quiet fell upon her.

All that had passed seemed as nothing. The burning house seemed a mere trifle in the awful presence of the great Thing up there in the heavens that was blotting out the stars as it had blotted from her mind for the moment all other earthly happenings.

She seemed to hear herself saying, "It's a Zeppelin," quite quietly, and then, "It was the noise of the burning house that prevented us hearing it before."

Everything seemed strangely ordinary. Never in her wildest imaginings had she pictured herself so serene, so self-possessed in the presence of this great death-dealer.

"This is the end," she said to herself, and then wondered that she had not foreseen it. Everything after all had been leading up to this moment. And since love was to be denied her how happy she should be to die!

The noise above by this time was making the noise of the burning lodge as nothing. It was deafening, dreadful, impossible to be borne.

"This is the end," she said again aloud in a strange indifference that was almost triumph. She said it to no one in particular, to the universe at large, to her joys and griefs, to all her life's experiences.

But the answer came from another quarter.

"Take the hose," said her companion, thrusting it into her hand, "I may be a thief, but I'm not an absolute brute."

Next moment Mrs. Dodsworth was racing up the drive at full speed, her brocade skirt clutched up on either side of her, and as she ran wildly on in the red glare from the burning, Ann saw her white hair and lace cap fall off and a great stream of black locks fly out Medusa-like behind her.

In an instant Ann had flung down the hose, leaving it spouting on the ground, and in two minutes she had overtaken Mrs. Dodsworth.

She seized her by the wrists. She held her.

"Stop," she shouted through the fearful din. "Where are you going?"

"To the man you call Green," shouted Mrs. Dodsworth in answer. "I'm a thief and he just about caught me this morning, but I got away and left him shut in where he may be in mortal danger."

"Where?" shouted Ann.

For answer Mrs. Dodsworth wrenched her wrists suddenly free and raced off again, Ann following after her. She did not come up with her until they were in the West Lodge and Jane had moved the dresser back from the opening.

Then Ann caught hold of her again.

"Don't stop me!" shrieked the half-demented Jane. "He may be in mortal danger, I tell you!"

"Go back!" shouted Ann. "Go back to where you came from!"

And before Jane could stop her she was halfway down the ladder carrying the lamp that Mr. Tosh had lighted.

It was strangely quiet in the passage. The din that had been so terrific up above was reduced here to a muffled buzzing, not so loud as the beating of her own heart. The air too was thick and heavy. It seemed to choke her. Yet she hurried on—on and on—till just as she was nearing the turning a stupendous crash that seemed to shake the very foundations of the earth sent her half deafened reeling forward.

The lamp had fallen from her hand and blazed up behind her, but that seemed a small thing at that moment. It was only for a moment too, for with a rushing sound the passage seemed to close in upon her and it. The light was suddenly extinguished. Sand fell cold upon her head and shoulders.

"Oh, my love—my love," she cried, staggering.

Then all at once there was a great shout. A second after strong arms caught her up and bore her swiftly along

through the thick darkness till she was set down gently with her back to the sand-wall just as another crash worse than the first seemed to bring the whole world down about her.

It seemed to her then that she must die of it. The air was full of sand. She could not breathe. Presently, however, it grew clearer and she found herself still alive and clinging desperately to the strong hands that all the while had held hers.

Then at last Green spoke.

"Miss Charteris," he said, with a strange trembling in his voice, "why did you come here?"

"It was a Zeppelin," said Ann, "and I came to warn you. I was told—that woman—the thief told me you were here and that you might be in mortal danger—so I just came," said Ann simply.

His hands tightened their grip for a moment. Then he laid hers gently in her lap and rose from her side in silence. She heard him groping about in the darkness. Some sand and pebbles fell quite near with a rattling sound, and she heard him smother an exclamation.

Then after a long moment of deathly stillness he came and sat down again close beside her.

"Miss Charteris," he said quietly, but still with that strange tremor in his voice, "I—I cannot thank you. I only know that you are brave enough to be told. That second bomb must have fallen about half-way down the passage. A solid mass of sand seems to have fallen between and saved us, but the whole passage has collapsed up to a few feet of where we are."

He paused and she could hear his quick breathing. Then there was another soft thud in the darkness. At the slight sound he started and half rose, but he paused again and spoke quickly, breathlessly. "I am going to try to force a passage at this end," he said. "Fortunately we are penned up in the airiest part of the tunnel. This gives us a chance. You must not mind if I leave you alone here in the dark. I shall be quite near. You will hear me digging—and if it is within my power we shall get clear."

He left her then and she heard him digging furiously. She could help him best by sitting still, she knew, sitting quite still and not crying out even when some sand from the roof fell on her shoulder again and seemed to her like death himself laying a hand there.

The digger had heard the sound of the fall, however, and in an instant was by her side feeling for her hands in the darkness. He found them covering her face.

"You are not afraid?" he whispered.

"No," she said. But even as she spoke she could not repress a sob.

He mistook the cause, remembering her cry in the passage—"Oh, my love—my love"—that had gone to his very heart.

There was no time to hesitate, no time to think.

"Miss Charteris," he said, striving to speak steadily, "I must say one thing in case—in case I do not get through in time—and—we go out together. The man you love is not here to be with you, but I have loved you from the very first moment I saw you, and shall love you till death, and after death if God wills. If—if there is anything at all beyond, you will not pass alone into the darkness.

It was spoken, and he was at his digging once more before in the flood of joy and wonder that overwhelmed her Ann could find one word in answer. After a moment, however, she rose and groped her way to him.

"Stop digging for a moment," she said, when she was quite close.

"I cannot," he said panting. "At any moment the roof may fall."

"Let it fall," said Ann, and a strange new quality in her voice compelling him he stood up straight and still beside her.

"Let it fall," she said again. "If we're together what does it matter?"

There was a moment's utter stillness. Then—

"Ann, do you mean it?" he whispered, trembling.

"Yes," she said steadily. "It is you I love. I told David yesterday that I could never marry him."

For reply he caught her to him and for one moment they clung together, the next he almost flung her from him.

"Don't say another word," he said. "We are going to get out now. I know it. I feel it."

As he spoke he began digging again as never before, while Ann in her former place with the sand and the pebbles dropping round her sat with closed eyes and set teeth praying hard for dear life.

It seemed to her ages afterwards, and Fred had just shouted in triumph at the first glimpse of the daylight when she heard several people talking outside the opening he had made.

"What's that?" said somebody. "Did ye hear it, Crombie?"

"Ay, did I. It was a man's voice. Will it be them, think ye?"

"Yes, it's them," shouted Fred hastily, at which there arose a confused sound of ejaculation. "Keep back, for God's sake!"

"It's some confounded special constables or something," he added to Ann as he went on enlarging the opening. "They'll be the death of us if they come stamping about over here. Keep back, you fools!" he shouted again.

"Bide whaur ye are, Crombie man!" said another voice.

"I'm jist seein' whaur they are," said Crombie obstinately.

"You'll see us buried, then," said Fred frantically, heaving out lidfuls of sand at the intruders. "What blooming idiot sent you here just now?" he added ungratefully as he went on heaving.

"It was a woman body," said Crombie, "that spoke over the telephone and told us to search the shore till we found the end o' the passage."

"Well, you've found it," said Fred, "so now quit and give us a chance."

"Ask if they are all safe at the Big House," said Ann inside.

"Ay, miss! They're a' safe," shouted several voices.

"Then away with you there," said Fred, digging away harder than ever and tell 'em we'll follow as soon as possible."

As he spoke his face appeared hot and grimy at the opening.

"But would we not better help ye to get clear?" said Crombie.

"No. Clear out yourselves. That's all I ask of you," said Fred.

After that, as one of the other men reminded Crombie, no one could blame them whatever happened. Thus it was that not a single human being was in sight when Fred and Ann, quarter of an hour later, emerged panting from under the whin-bush.

Dear life had been granted them and for a long moment they sat side by side in silence drinking it in with the sea-fragrance and the dawn-radiance. But after that, looking at each other, they laughed aloud, for they were more than anything like prehistoric cave-dwellers.

Fred's hands were cut and bleeding from the edges of his tin lid. His hair and face were singed and blackened from his encounter with Mrs. Dodsworth. But he had the suit-case though he had lost the thief, and he patted it delightedly and triumphed gloriously.

Ann's white evening dress was a mere tattered brown remnant, her face till she washed it in a pool was black with smoke, her hair, tangled and full of sand, hung wildly upon her shoulders, but as she stood there smiling on the bents Fred thought she had never been half so lovely.

"Ah, my dear!" he cried, "my dear!"

And tossing aside the suit-case he knelt down before her at last and lifted the hem of her ragged gown to his lips.

"Now put this on," he said rising and taking off his coat, "and sit down and let's explain things before we go a step further."

"But what about the poor old dears?" said Ann hesitating.

"They must wait," said Fred recklessly. "You heard they were all safe and I claim this hour, Wrack-straws or no Wrack-straws. Why you do not even know my name yet!"

"Is it not James Green?" said Ann.

"Certainly not," said Fred.

At this the first faint shadow fell across Ann's happiness. The thought of the assumed name recalled her former vague misgivings—the insinuations—the suspicions.

She would love him in spite of all. She could not help it. But the old regret revived in her. Why was he here out of it all? Her heart sank a little.

He was watching her curiously the while, the colour rising in his face as he lay full-length on the ground before her, resting his chin on his hands. Some words of Piffard's were coming back to him again at that moment and he was thrilling with the understanding of them.

"I could imagine," Piffard had said, "that it would be fine to have an honour like that to lay at the feet of a woman if one loved her."

"No, my name is not James Green," he said after a moment, "and I am not a chauffeur, and I'm not a detective—I've made a regular hash of that—I am a soldier——"

Ann drew a sharp breath.

"—at least for the period of the war, and I came home from the front wounded, and I'm going back soon, dear, but we won't talk of that yet. And you've seen me before, you blind little thing, long before I came to Bartonsmuir."

She was silent, leaning towards him with parted lips, her whole wondering soul in her eyes.

"Where have I seen you?" she whispered breathlessly.

She felt the tears rising—tears of relief and pride and joy. She forced them back, however. "Where have I seen you?" she repeated.

"You were very good to me," he said, watching her, "extravagantly good on a long railway journey once. You gave your rug to me, you foolish child. And I—I love it so much that I have never been able to give it back to you yet."

But I have it at the lodge—if there is a lodge now—I have had it with me ever since.”

Still for a moment longer Ann sat leaning forward, gazing at him through her rising tears, recognising him through all the alterations in him, then hiding her face in her tattered rags, she cried and cried and cried for happiness.

It was quite a long time after this before they returned to practicalities. The tide had come in and the sun was fully risen.

“By the by,” said Ann, with her head on his shoulder, where it had been for the last half-hour or so, “you haven’t told me your name *yet!*”

“Nor I have,” he laughed. “Well, it’s Fred Lorimer. Have you ever heard it before?” he added, as she started up.

“*Heard* it?” exclaimed Ann, flushing scarlet in her excitement. “Do you mean to say you are Mrs. Bellairs’s nephew?”

Fred laughed and nodded.

“*The V.C.?*” cried Ann.

“The same,” said Fred, flushing scarlet in his turn.

“Well, I shall *never* forgive you!” said Ann.

The very next moment, however, she had flung her arms round his neck.

After that of course there followed more explanations, but as the reader knows them all already they shall be omitted here. They would be dull reading. They were anything but dull, however, to those two among the bents that morning.

It was broad day when they were ended and Ann started to her feet.

“I am an unheard-of little beast,” she exclaimed. “What will my poor old dears be thinking?”

And with that she went hurrying off down the path by the shortest cut and refused so much as to pause again before she reached the Big House.

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH

IN WHICH MISS CAROLINE AND THIS RECORD BOTH COME
TO A CONCLUSION

It will be remembered that just before the telephone bell rang, which was the prelude to such strange events, Mr. Tosh had risen to address the conference, and that when Ann had left the room to attend to the call Miss Caroline had motioned to him to proceed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began forgetting that he was "the only gentleman." In the general perturbation, however, the mistake passed unheeded. "Ladies and gentlemen, it seems to me, with all due deference to Miss Caroline, that the method proposed for dealing with the—German who has gained access to this house is hardly adequate. If he—or she—is a German, he or she will be a person who has no sense of shame to appeal to and no gratitude to be aroused. Miss Caroline's manner of dealing with him or her presupposes both these qualities. Therefore—again with all due deference to Miss Caroline—it will fail I much fear of its object. *But—*"

Here Mr. Tosh paused and smiled encouragingly upon his audience. They all sat listening as though petrified. Even Maggie had removed her apron from her head. She now sat breathing heavily through her nose and the sound seemed to add to rather than to detract from the general tension. Miss Emily, too, swallowed audibly once or twice. She sat craning forward the picture of anxious bewilderment. The whole conference had come upon her as an overwhelming surprise. Lottie herself must have been deceived surely. Her reassurances had been as hollow as Ann's promises. She shuddered, too, as she reflected that it would be her duty presently to tell all *she* knew.

"But," Mr. Tosh went on, "recognising that it would be a thousand pities that so much generosity should go to waste, I am pleased to be able to inform you that another already has this matter in hand and by different and—shall I say?—by less altruistic methods has all but secured the criminal."

At this there was a sensation among the audience and Mrs. Fennimore bounded to her feet in great excitement.

"Aha!" she exclaimed. "I know who you mean, Mr. Tosh. But surely I should have been informed of his arrival sooner."

"Madam?" said Mr. Tosh, raising his eyebrows in astonishment. "You know who he is then?"

"Of course I do," said Mrs. Fennimore. "It's Sir Joseph Bird from Scotland Yard."

At this the sensation was doubled and trebled.

"Sir Joseph Bird!" exclaimed Mr. Tosh. "Who is Sir Joseph Bird?"

"From Scotland Yard?" exclaimed Miss Caroline in great indignation. "Who has dared——"

She rose majestically to her feet.

"Oh, well, Miss Caroline," said Mrs. Fennimore, her self-assurance seeming to wither in the glare from Miss Caroline's eyes, "I didn't and I wouldn't have done it without consulting you—though I am sure," she added, reviving a little as she thought of her wrongs, "considering that the Fennimore sapphires are a-missing—it would have been only natural if I had."

"You have not answered my question, madam," said Miss Caroline, taking no more notice of the Fennimore sapphires, as Mrs. Bellairs said afterwards, than if they had been glass beads. "I did not ask you who had *not* sent for a detective from Scotland Yard without consulting me. I desired to know who had."

"Let her speak for herself then," said Mrs. Fennimore. "Mrs. Dodsworth——"

Here she stopped as though she had been shot.

The place near the door which Mrs. Dodsworth had occupied was vacant. Miss Gellatly was in the next one to it reading *The Ultimate Belief*. Finding that the conference did not concern her she was passing the time as pleasantly as she could. On being addressed, however, by name, she looked up and found the eyes of the company fixed upon her.

"Miss Gellatly," said Miss Caroline, not without suppressed wrath as she observed the volume lying open on Miss Gellatly's lap, "did you happen to notice when Mrs. Dodsworth left the room?"

"Certainly," said Miss Gellatly, "and she left me a message for you, Miss Caroline. She said she hoped you would excuse her for a few minutes, as from what Miss Charteris said she thought she might probably require assistance."

"Assistance?" said Miss Caroline. "What kind of assistance?"

"I do not know," said Miss Gellatly. "She did not say. She seemed rather hurried."

The eyes of the conference were still fixed upon Miss Gellatly, who was politely awaiting their removal before returning her own to her book, when a sudden diversion was caused by Miss Emily rising in her corner and clearing her throat very loudly.

"Caroline and friends," she began with a kind of gulp. Then she stuck, apparently hopelessly.

"Proceed, Emily," said Miss Caroline. "If you have anything to say, say it."

"Yes, I am sorry I have something," said Miss Emily, stumbling over her words in her haste to deliver herself. "I would give anything not to have to say it, but my duty compels me to speak out."

"To speak out, Emily?" said Miss Caroline severely. "Have you then been concealing something?"

"Yes, I have, Caroline," said Miss Emily on the verge of tears, her lace lappets trembling, "and believe me I blame

myself. But Miss Charteris assured me she would inform me at once if she saw any necessity for action, and—and so I temporised."

"Temporised?" said Miss Caroline frowning.

"Yes, I should have informed you at once," said Miss Emily, "that Green was thought to be a German spy."

"A German spy!" exclaimed Mrs. Bellairs. Then sitting back in her chair she gave way to silent laughter.

No one noticed her, however, except Maggie, who whispered to the cook that Mrs. Bellairs was in a fit, and was promptly told to shut up.

All other eyes were fixed upon Miss Emily.

"The mistake I made," she went on tremulously, "was in trusting to Miss Charteris. She—she is not trustworthy."

"Not trustworthy!" exclaimed Miss Caroline, and Mrs. Bellairs's mirth ceased as suddenly as it had begun. She sat now quite grave, though a trifle breathless, listening intently to every word.

"No," said Miss Emily, "sorry as I am to say it, when something did happen she told me nothing of it."

"When something did happen?" said Miss Caroline sharply. "Explain yourself, Emily."

But Miss Emily had reached her limit.

"Go on, Arbuthnot," she said faintly.

Then she sat down on her seat again and covered her face with her hands.

Arbuthnot needed no second telling.

"What Miss Emily means, m'm," she said, starting up in her place, "is that when Miss Charteris was informed by me that there was a strange young woman in Green's lodgings——"

"What?" exclaimed Mrs. Bellairs.

"Arbuthnot," said Miss Caroline, "kindly be careful what you are saying. A strange young woman in Green's lodgings? Do you mean the West Lodge?"

"Yes, m'm, I do," said Arbuthnot. "I saw her there myself, early in the morning, doing her hair, m'm—long

black hair it was—and lowerin' the blind as if the place belonged to her."

The sensation which followed this satisfied even Arbuthnot.

Miss Caroline, however, quelled it instantly into silence.

"Go on," she said peremptorily; "and you informed Miss Charteris of this?"

"Yes, I did, m'm," said Arbuthnot, "thinkin' she would tell you, m'm. But never a word has she told seemin'ly either about Green bein' a spy or his accomplice."

At this, however, Mrs. Bellairs rose up in a white heat.

"And quite right, too," she exclaimed, flinging the words across the room at Arbuthnot. "Green a German spy with an accomplice? Nonsense! He is nothing of the sort!"

A dull flush mounted in Arbuthnot's face.

"Beggin' your pardon, m'm——" she began.

"Rather beg *his* pardon," said Mr. Tosh, rising indignantly. "He is the detective to whom I was referring."

"Then it was *not* Sir Joseph Bird?" said Mrs. Fennimore.

But no one heard her except Mrs. Bellairs, who was still standing.

"No, he is not Sir Joseph Bird," she announced. "He is something very much better. If he is a detective, as you say, sir," she went on, turning to Mr. Tosh, "he is one only for the time being. His name is not James Green. His name is Frederick Lorimer. He is my nephew and a distinguished soldier. He was severely wounded at the first battle of Ypres, where he showed conspicuous gallantry for which he received the V.C."

Here Mrs. Bellairs sat down amid a sensation yet unequalled.

"And as for the young woman with the black hair," said Mr. Tosh, as soon as he could make himself heard, "I have been considering the matter and am now convinced that it can be easily explained. The young woman referred to by Arbuthnot was not, it is now clear to me, there for any reason—any reason connected with Gr—with Mr.

Lorimer. She was there unknown to him for reasons connected with the West Lodge itself, which is, I am informed, provided with an underground passage where accommodation might be found for any amount of plunder."

Now whether Mr. Tosh would have gone on then giving details of how he had received this information will never be known, for just at that moment Maggie, eluding the grasp of the cook, leaped up from her seat, exclaiming—

"Eh, mercy! There's a thrashin'-machine comin'."

A sudden cessation of the conference followed. The talk gave place to a tense silence.

"I hear it, I hear it!" said Maggie again. "Or—or else it's guns practisin'."

"*You* and your guns!" said the cook angrily.

But certainly there was a peculiar noise.

And it was like a thrashing machine which was presently joined by another thrashing machine and another and another until there were dozens of them. And as every moment there seemed to be more and more of them, the windows and doors all over the house began to rattle. The ornaments on the mantelpiece jingled wildly. Then all at once, with a terrific crash of glass, came a sound as of a hundred wardrobes falling downstairs simultaneously.

They had all sat as though petrified until that moment. Now they all leapt up with their eyes fixed as though by instinct on Miss Caroline. And she, finding them looking at her, said three words in her ordinary voice. They were quiet inaudible, but by her lips they knew what she had said, and with one accord, following her example, they kneeled down side by side and waited.

It seemed hours to them, holding their tortured ears while the foundations of the earth seemed to be returning to chaos, but in reality it was only a few minutes before the intolerable noise began to decrease. It was soon only a buzzing in the distance. They were still kneeling, however, as though paralysed, when the shrill familiar sound of the telephone bell again suddenly struck through the troubled silence.

Miss Caroline raised her head. All eyes were hidden except Maggie's round ones in the back row. These met hers wildly and stared at her as though fascinated.

Miss Caroline nodded sideways towards the door. The unfailing Maggie scrambled to her feet and presently the kneeling company could hear her talking in the hall.

This was easy, because Maggie had the ineradicable habit of speaking at the telephone as though she were addressing a deaf person. What she said was not conducive to devotion. On the contrary it was very disturbing. Yet still Miss Caroline gave no signal to rise.

"The fact is," said Mrs. Bellairs to herself as her stiff knee began to be sore with kneeling, "Caroline is not praying now. She is only listening."

So were they all. They could not help it.

"What?" said Maggie three times very loudly.

Then—"Eh, mercy!" twice.

Then—"My faix! That's terrible!"

Then—"What'll Mr. Tosh say?"

Here that gentleman stirred uneasily.

Then—"What are they doin', did ye say? Oh, they're prayin' the now. But I'll tell them. Yes. I'll tell them."

Then—"Who will I say was speakin'?"

To this there seemed to be a long answer.

Then—"Eh, mercy!" exclaimed Maggie again. "I wonder ye're no feared!"

Here she was rung off suddenly.

At this, as though she had been waiting for it, Miss Caroline rose from her knees and they were all standing expectantly when Maggie burst into the room.

"That was Mrs. Dodsworth speakin'," she began breathlessly. "An' she says she's the thief."

"The *what*?" said Miss Caroline sharply.

"The thief, m'm," said Maggie again, "an' she was the young woman wi' the black hair, too, an' she's rung up to save ye further worry about her. She's got clear off she says—but she said to tell ye," here Maggie gasped for

air, "that the East Lodge is burnt," here she turned triumphantly to Mr. Tosh, "and the West Lodge is all fallen in for a bomb from the Zeppelin fell beyond it—an' she says it's a mercy it didna fall *on* the lodge because o' all the patrols that's under there—though if the lodge has fallen in anyway I dinna see what odds it can be to the patrols, puir craters. But that's no' the worst," continued Maggie, revelling in the chance that caused her for once to be the centre of her little world, "that's no' *near* the worst." Once more she gasped for air. "Miss Charteris an' Mr. Lorimer's buried below the West Lodge in a underground passage."

At this the surrounding silence was broken by a wail from Mrs. Bellairs which was echoed all round the room in a hubbub of lamentation. Every one was mourning and speaking at once when Miss Caroline made a sign for silence.

"Then if our two young friends are buried," she said firmly, "I now call for volunteers to dig them out. And we should be thankful," she added, "that they are in a passage, which having, as all passages must have, two ends, thus affords two chances of escape."

"Bravo, Caroline!" said Mrs. Bellairs, removing her handkerchief from her eyes.

"Here's me then, m'm," said Arbuthnot, looking more wrinkled than ever as she came forward, "And before," she added, turning to the others and speaking in a choked voice, "before I had said what I have said about them two I wish I had been buried myself."

At this there was a murmur of approval and Mrs. Bellairs rose and crossed the room to her.

"Never mind, Arbuthnot," she said. "It was my nephew's own fault throughout. When a man's a V.C. he's a V.C. and he shouldn't try to be anything else. But never you fear," she added, "we'll get them out."

"I'll go, Caroline," she went on stepping forward.

"And I'll go, Miss Caroline," said Miss Gellatly unexpectedly.

"To think," she added, "of those two down there! It's a romance. The brave soldier and the lovely maiden. I'll go at once and get my boots on."

"Will I get the spades, m'm?" said Maggie, "an' the lanterns."

One by one they all volunteered.

"Though what I'm to do when I get there I know not," said Mrs. Pitmirran.

"You can wheel me in my bath-chair for I am going," said Miss Eldershaw.

"Oh, thank you," said Mrs. Pitmirran with a sniff, "one of the servants can do that for you."

It ended of course in Maggie having to do it.

Mrs. Fennimore was the only exception.

"I really cannot see," she said, "what object would be gained by my going. It is very unlikely indeed that we shall find those two unfortunate young people alive. I shall be delighted, however, to telephone to the police and ask them to come to your assistance as soon as possible."

"Madam, I have already done so," said Mr. Tosh, "and the man in the police office, who seemed rather excited, said there was no one in except himself."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Fennimore. "I am sorry for that. All the same, though it seems nasty to say it, I really cannot see why, because Mr. Lorimer and Miss Charteris have exposed themselves to danger and suffered for it, I should do likewise. I never could stand night-air since I had pneumonia."

Just as she said these words, however, Maggie burst in again.

"Oh, and I had forgot to tell ye, m'm," she said to Miss Caroline, "all the jewels and silver is with—with the gentleman that was Green, m'm. He got them all from her but one before she got away—and he has them there with him, m'm."

"Bring my fur coat," said Mrs. Fennimore suddenly.

"But I thought you wasn't goin', m'm," said Maggie.

"Never think, my girl," said Mrs. Fennimore, and in five minutes she was ready.

Half an hour later the house was deserted and a procession, headed by Miss Caroline and ending in the bath-chair, was proceeding down the drive in the direction of the West Lodge. They carried every available lantern from the motor-lamps to the fairy-light that the cook used to go to the cellar with, and the danger of doing this while the Zeppelin might still be about only added a zestful recklessness to the expedition. They carried also every available implement from the coal-house shovels to Miss Caroline's garden-trowel. Arbuthnot insisted upon shouldering the largest spade which she compelled Mr. Tosh to abandon to her. The West Lodge was a heap of ruins. Both floor and furniture had collapsed into the dug-out. But they found the entrance to the passage. It was blocked with sand from floor to ceiling. Still, as Miss Caroline said, to have found it at all was a great matter.

She arranged her party in shifts and at first they all took turns in digging with the exception of Mrs. Bellairs and Miss Eldershaw. Miss Caroline herself took her turn with the rest, and Mrs. Fennimore with the family sapphires before her mind's eye did wonders. Gradually, however, one and another came and sat down in the shelter of the ruined kitchen wall, where Mrs. Bellairs, though weeping copiously all the time, had managed to organise refreshments. Here Mrs. Bellairs plied them with hot drinks in order to detain them as long as possible, for Arbuthnot had whispered—

"For God's sake keep them here, m'm! They're terrible willin', puir things, but they're desperate hinder-some."

Thus morning found the greater part of them rather grimy and Eskimo-like among a litter of comforts and kitchen utensils.

Maggie managed the transport and by 5 a.m. had been forty-seven times up to the Big House and once to the

farm stading. The latter she had found deserted by every able-bodied man and woman there, because they had all had to go off with a special constable to search the sand-dunes.

After her forty-seventh journey to the house, however, Maggie reappeared in a frenzy of excitement.

"They're up," she screamed at the top of her voice, standing at the edge of the shaft. "They're up. The special constables has got them out and they'll be here as soon as ye can say Jack Robinson!"

The effect of this communication may be imagined but not described. The cook, who, as she said, was like to burst, instantly flung down her big coal-shovel. Arbuthnot thrust her spade into the sand and came up wiping her hands and panting. Mr. Tosh, who happened to be on the resting-shift just then, hastened off at once to hear particulars of the rescue, and presently the procession followed him, Maggie leading with Miss Eldershaw's bath-chair at a kind of hand-gallop.

Never in all its history had the Big House at Bartonsmuir witnessed such a scene as that which took place when Fred and Ann at last appeared. Every one wanted to shake hands with Fred, every one wanted to embrace Ann. When the suit-case was produced amid a chorus of delight they crowded round it like children round a tree at Christmas.

Arbuthnot counted the Queen Anne silver like a miser. Mrs. Fennimore put on all the sapphires. But the diamond sun was missing though they searched every corner for it. Mrs. Pitmirran, however, when the news was broken to her, was, to the surprise of every one, consumed with laughter.

"You seem to take it as a joke," said Mrs. Fennimore severely.

"Because it ~~is~~ a joke," wheezed Mrs. Pitmirran as soon as she was able to speak. "That diamond sun is a replica worth two pounds fifteen shillings. The real one worth fifteen hundred pounds is in the bank at Netherton."

At this there was a general shout of hilarity in the midst of which they parted for a time to wash and prepare for breakfast. And what a breakfast that was!

The cook had wept over the scrambled eggs as she thought that there might have been no one alive to eat them. The eggs were none the worse, however, nor were the other delicious things she sent up—the scones, the dropped scones, the fish-cakes, the oat-cakes. From the devilled kidneys to the huge ham on the sideboard everything, as Fred said, was ripping.

Even if they had not been so, however, the company would have thought they were.

My! as Maggie said, they *were* hungry, even those who had been having refreshments all night at intervals.

As for Fred and Ann——!

It was lovely weather outside, too; nobody minded the broken windows.

After the feast there were speeches and a momentary gloom was cast by Miss Caroline feeling it to be her duty to condole with Mr. Tosh upon the loss of his manuscript.

This cloud was immediately dispelled, however, by the author declaring that never in his life had he felt so relieved at anything, as now he could start an entirely new book instead of that other which since the war broke out had been not only nominally but really an Utter Impossibility.

Thus serenity was again restored, had again supervened, when Miss Emily, happening to look out of the window which commanded the drive, saw two familiar figures approaching.

“My dear Maud,” she said hastily in a low voice to Mrs. Bellairs, “here are Lottie and Dr. Warren coming back again. How very kind, but how very inopportune!”

“Because of Ann and Fred, do you mean?” said Mrs. Bellairs beaming upon that radiant pair.

“Yes, they’ve got engaged. I don’t know how I’m sure,” said Miss Emily distractedly. “Ann just told me and said

she would explain afterwards. And now here is David back. It really is very awkward."

Mrs. Bellairs laughed her wholehearted merry laugh.

"My good Emily," she said, "don't worry till things happen. That has always been my motto. You'll find it won't be a bit awkward."

And it was not, but it was fearfully exciting, for after the two new-comers had given an account of the awful reports they had heard at Briars Junction where they had been detained and had related how they had at last decided to come back at all costs to see for themselves what had taken place, David Warren suddenly rose in his place looking very well and youthful and said—

"And there was another reason, ladies and gentlemen, for our coming back. The evening before last you gave a betrothal feast here. It was a great success, but since then the betrothed who were entertained so cordially and delightfully have agreed to be unbetrothed, not because they have less regard for each other now, for they have rather more than they had before, but because their betrothal was a mistake—which is proved by the fact that in the short time which has elapsed since they were free to do so they have both become re-betrothed to other people."

"David, how *did* you know?" cried Ann in great confusion.

At this there was a burst of laughter which subsided suddenly as Fred rose to speak.

"Without unduly exercising my gifts as a detective——" he began.

Here there was great applause which lasted for a full half minute.

"I think I can tell you, ladies and gentlemen," Fred went on, "who is the fourth in this Betrothed Quartette."

Again there was great applause and every one looked at Lottie, who was smiling at them all through tears which she made no attempt at concealing.

"I shall only add," Fred went on, "that if the first be-

trothal feast was a success this should be doubly so, since there are two Engaged Couples instead of only one at it."

Here he sat down amid a storm of approbation.

Then up sprang Mr. Tosh as though he were seventeen instead of seventy, waving his table napkin.

"Three cheers for the V.C.!" he cried.

"And for the R.A.M.C.!" yelled Fred, determined to make himself heard through the tremendous cheering which arose in response this time. It came not only from round the table but also from the hall outside. They could hear Arbuthnot's cracked voice taking the lead there and Maggie's boots wildly stamping.

"They have been listening," said Miss Caroline, "but after all why should they not take part on this occasion? Be so kind, Mr. Lorimer, as to open the door that they may hear what I have to say since it concerns them as much as any of us."

"I am proud," she continued when her order had been executed and a crowd of excited faces had appeared in the doorway with Arbuthnot in the fore-front and Maggie open-mouthed as usual in the rear behind the cook, "I am proud to see a united household here and to know that in a time of stress and during a crisis of the first magnitude the behaviour of those who constitute the community of which I have the honour to be the chief has been beyond all admiration. I am glad to be able to inform those who were not there at the time, that during the actual occurrence of the Zeppelin raid not one only but all of us showed the utmost self-control and composure."

"Don't tell, my dear," here whispered Mrs. Bellairs to Lottie. "I screamed out several times and I have no doubt the others did too, but that blessed Zeppelin made such a noise that mercifully no one heard us."

"Not one moved," continued Miss Caroline. "Not one rose from his or her knees."

"Except me, m'm," said Maggie from the doorway, "and you told me to, m'm."

"Quite, ye fool!" whispered the cook sternly.

"Except Maggie," said Miss Caroline graciously, "and I told her to. She was the one exception."

It was now the turn of the Quartette to applaud and they took full advantage of their opportunity.

Miss Caroline waited patiently till they had subsided again. "But not only did we show fortitude," she continued at last, "under a test to which none of us before had been subjected, but on a second contingency arising immediately after the first we showed ourselves to be possessed of both energy and initiative."

Here for one moment only she permitted applause again.

"You see us now," she went on after it was over, and addressing herself to the Engaged Couples only, "having surmounted this billow and being all the better for it. Our little company is intact except for a spurious unit better absent. Our possessions are intact except again for a spurious unit."

This last was received by a cackle from Mrs. Pitmirran.

"Our author's genius is intact," continued Miss Caroline, "whatever his manuscript may be."

Here there was such great and prolonged applause that he gratified Mr. Tosh had to rise and bow twice over.

"Our courage is intact," Miss Caroline then went on. "Indeed, it is what it never was before. We are now aware that in these times of tumult even those possessed of every capability are like ourselves but Wrack-straws. We are all without exception being borne hither and thither on the tide of war, together with our loves, our hates, and our ambitions. But, my dear friends, so long as we are honest and devout we are prepared, as we have seen, for any weather."

The enthusiasm after this was quite indescribable. It lasted indeed till the afternoon, when amid showers of last summer's rose-leaves from the pot-pourri jars, Lottie and David set off for the station for the second time.

This time, however, they did not go on foot. Fred drove

them in the motor sitting side by side with his former rival. Ann and Lottie sat behind.

"You must come very often when they have gone away," said Ann, with a little catch in her voice, and gazing wistfully for all her pride in them at the two stalwart figures in front.

"Yes—when they have gone away," said Lottie, and the two women sat silent for the most part after that. But the men on the front seats talked hard till the last moment of the war and being in the thick of it and driving the Boches over the Rhine again.

Whatever Fred's faults as a chauffeur for old ladies had been he, on the return journey with Ann, did not err on the side of over-swiftness. For one thing he wanted to be as long over it as he could, and for another it is always dangerous to go beyond a snail's pace when paying no attention to the roadway and steering with the right hand only.

The glorious sunset was quite lost upon him and Ann, and they did not even glance in the direction of the East Lodge as they passed it. It never occurred to them to stop and examine that ruin for any possible exception to the conclusion of Miss Caroline.

To all appearance the abode of authorship was utterly deserted besides. It was not so, however. In the mysterious twilight of the wrecked interior, unapplauded, unattended, Walter the cat had re-established himself. Fire, flood, the desertion of all his friends, had failed to force him to abandon his place in the universe. He lay, one fixed unit at least in a world of Wrack-straws, curled up on a heap of dry ashes which had once been a last chapter.

THE END OF THIS RECORD, BUT BY NO MEANS OF THE
WRACK-STRAWS



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